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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE 12TH SS PANZER DIVISION "HITLERJUGEND": A HISTORY

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled .....
THE 12TH SS PANZER DIVISION
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Master of ARTS .....

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ABSTRACT

Armoured divisions of the Waffen-SS were considered by many to be the elite of the German armed forces during the Second World War. As Hitler's emergency "fire brigade", they were able to halt the enemy time and time again by their determined and often fanatical resistance. The last of these renowned divisions to be formed was the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend". The 12th SS distinguished itself not only by its amazing combat performance, but also by the fact that it was initially composed of adolescent recruits from the Hitler Youth, whose average age was not over eighteen.

This study endeavours to provide a more detailed examination of the Hitler Youth Division than has hitherto been provided by most writers and historians. After a brief overview of the development of the SS and of the Waffen-SS prior to 1943, the first chapter examines the negotiations surrounding the formation of the 12th SS, the recruiting campaign for the division, and the problems and methods involved in its military training.

Chapter Two presents a detailed chronological account of the 12th SS Panzer Division's role in the Normandy campaign. The division's outstanding combat performance is said to have resulted from its superior weaponry and training, the youthful enthusiasm of its troops, and, most importantly, the aggressive and reckless type of leadership provided by young Waffen-SS officers such as Kurt Meyer.

The involvement of the 12th SS in the Ardennes offensive and in Hungary is the subject of the third chapter. The division's disappointing combat record in these two campaigns is ascribed to the fact that it was but the shadow of its former self after the fighting in Normandy.

The heavy casualties among its original cadre of veteran officers and young, enthusiastic recruits had resulted in its ranks being filled with inexperienced and poorly-trained replacements, often simply taken from the Navy or Air Force. The 12th SS was therefore no longer of a high enough calibre to perform as an elite combat formation.

The study concludes by using the example of the Hitler Youth Division to refute claims by former German Army officers that Waffen-SS units performed poorly in battle, or that they had strained relations with their Wehrmacht superiors. However, the study also rejects claims by Waffen-SS apologists that they were "soldiers like any others". The 12th SS Panzer Division's murder of prisoners-of-war and its ruthless treatment of regular German soldiers in Normandy indicate that its men were a breed apart from troops of the regular Army. The 12th SS was indeed a crack military formation, but one which possessed a reckless and aggressive spirit, recognizing few moral limitations, which distinguished it from units of the German Wehrmacht.

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INTRODUCTION

Divisions of the Waffen-SS were considered by many to be the elite of the German armed forces during the Second World War. SS armoured and mechanized divisions were especially renowned for their fierce and determined fighting ability on the most critical sectors of the German front. As Hitler's emergency "fire brigade", they were able to halt the enemy time and time again by their fanatical and almost suicidal resistance. Although the Waffen-SS eventually conscripted large numbers of unenthusiastic foreigners into its ranks, swelling it to a force of over 900,000 men, the small number of elite SS divisions retained much of their elan and fighting ability right down to the last desperate months of the war.

Since the end of World War Two, the Waffen-SS has become the subject of much debate and controversy. In October 1946, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg concluded that SS combat troops had been an integral and criminal part of Himmler's SS empire.[1] This ruling attached a stigma of guilt to the Waffen-SS which remained unchallenged for almost a decade. Subsequent historians tended to minimize the importance of SS units in their accounts of German military operations. Former German Army officers endeavoured to dissociate themselves from the Waffen-SS, claiming that SS divisions had been poorly led, poorly trained, and a failure in battle.[2]

It was only in the mid-1950s that veterans of the Waffen-SS first endeavoured to remove the aura of criminality which surrounded them. Organizing themselves into the Mutual Aid Society of the Waffen-SS (HIAG), they claimed that SS troops had been "soldiers like any others". They maintained that the Waffen-SS had been a military force which was

independent from Himmler's other SS formations, and little different from the regular German Army. From the pens of these veterans came a flood of divisional and unit histories, praising the fighting abilities of the Waffen-SS and rejecting its condemnation by the International Military Tribunal.[3]

As might be expected, such apologist writings were usually one-sided and superficial, relying primarily upon personal reminiscences rather than actual documentation. It was left to an American historian, George H. Stein, to produce the first truly professional and scholarly history of the Waffen-SS in 1966.[4] Making extensive use of captured SS documents, Stein was able to create a more balanced portrait, which acknowledged the outstanding combat record of elite SS divisions, but at the same time stressed that the Waffen-SS was not completely distinct or separate from Himmler's empire.

Stein's book has remained the best single work on the Waffen-SS to date. Since the appearance of his study, only two further publications have emerged which are worthy of note: James J. Weingartner's Hitler's Guard: The Story of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945, and Charles W. Sydnor Jr.'s Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945.[5] Both works endeavour to provide detailed and well-researched histories of two of the most famous armoured divisions of the Waffen-SS. Aside from these studies, however, most SS divisions have yet to be researched and examined in a thorough and scholarly fashion.[6]

Such is the case with the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend". The 12th SS Panzer Division was the last of the renowned SS armoured divisions to be formed during the war. It played a major role in the battle for Normandy, in the Ardennes offensive, and in the final German

offensive in Hungary. The division distinguished itself not only by its amazing performance in battle, but also by the fact that it was initially composed of adolescent recruits from the Hitler Youth, whose average age was not over eighteen.

The first book to deal at length with the 12th SS Panzer Division was Kurt Meyer's Grenadiere.[7] As a former commander of the Hitler Youth Division, Meyer was able to provide a dramatic and readable account of the division's combat exploits and accomplishments in the summer of 1944. However, the author's desire to vindicate the tarnished reputation of the Waffen-SS frequently led him to extoll the virtues of his SS troops, while glossing over their shortcomings. In addition, Meyer limited himself primarily to his personal experiences in Normandy, with little mention being made of the division's subsequent wartime history.

The 12th SS Panzer Division has also been referred to in allied histories of the Second World War. It receives the most attention in the official Canadian history, which presents a brief but objective description of the division's role in Normandy, using captured German documents and oral testimony given by former SS officers.[8] Yet in many other instances, allied histories have only made distorted and exaggerated references to the 12th SS, presenting it as a unit of "hand-picked fanatical Nazis,"[9] which was "seemingly more animal than human,"[10] and "almost exclusively recruited from professional killers."[11]

A much more objective and scholarly view of the division has been provided in Gerhard Rempel's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation "The Misguided Generation: Hitler Youth and SS, 1933-1945".[12] Making extensive use of captured German documents, Rempel devotes the final chapter of his study to the 12th SS Panzer Division. Yet despite its

admirable thoroughness and detail, Rempel's chapter deals almost exclusively with the negotiations and problems surrounding the formation of the division. It provides only a very brief description of the division's involvement in Normandy, and nothing on its subsequent actions in the Ardennes and Hungary.

The third volume of Roger James Bender and Hugh Page Taylor's ambitious work Uniforms, Organization and History of the Waffen-SS devotes much more attention to the military record of the Hitler Youth Division.[13] Bender and Taylor rely on a wide range of primary and secondary sources to trace the division's combat exploits up to the end of World War Two. However, because their study is only one chapter in a work devoted to all divisions of the Waffen-SS, it is by necessity only an overview.

Jean Mabire's Les jeunes fauves du Fuehrer: La Division SS Hitlerjugend dans la bataille de Normandie is the most recent work to appear on the 12th SS Panzer Division.[14] While Mabire's work does provide an exciting account of the division's combat exploits in Normandy, it can best be described as an historical novel, rather than as a serious, scholarly study. Mabire's tendency to rely upon the work of Waffen-SS apologists also deprives his book of any claim to be an objective or critical account.

Thus, while the 12th SS Panzer Division has not been completely ignored by writers and historians, neither has it been the subject of a scholarly or comprehensive study. This thesis will therefore endeavour to provide a more detailed examination of the Hitler Youth Division, tracing its history from its formation in the spring of 1943, down to the eventual surrender of its shattered remnants in May 1945. This will

include an account and assessment of the division's combat performance in Normandy, the Ardennes, and Hungary. It will also involve an examination of some of the more contentious issues surrounding the division, such as its involvement in war crimes, the importance of ideology within its ranks, and the extent to which it was a unit of "soldiers like any others".

As is so often the case with the losing side in a war, most of the records of the 12th SS Panzer Division remain strewn across the battlefields of Europe. Those records that have survived deal primarily with the division's activities before its commitment in Normandy, or deal only with its supply and artillery units. As a result, this study has been forced to glean much of its information indirectly from a wide range of secondary sources.[15] Personal memoirs, allied official histories, interviews with former officers, and scholarly monographs have all been used extensively to supplement available documents. The fact that even secondary sources contain relatively little on the division's involvement in the Ardennes and Hungary has meant that the concluding chapter will be rather sketchy in its treatment of these campaigns. It is this which accounts for the somewhat lop-sided approach of the thesis as a whole, which devotes considerable space to the formation of the division, while providing only a brief overview of its performance during the last months of the war.

Although the resulting study cannot be regarded as a final or definitive history of the 12th SS Panzer Division, it is hoped that it will at least partially fill the gap in the existing literature on the subject. Moreover, while this study could perhaps be described as a "unit history" of the Hitler Youth Division, it is hoped that it will

actually be more than this. By focusing on the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend", it is hoped that some light will also be shed upon some of the complex issues and controversies which have emerged with regard to the basic nature, characteristics, and ability of the Waffen-SS.

NOTES - INTRODUCTION

1 Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 - 1 October 1946, 42 vols. (Nuremberg, 1948), 22: 512-517.

2 See for example Siegfried Westphal, The German Army in the West (London: Cassell, 1951). General Walter Warlimont also plays down the importance of the Waffen-SS in Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939-1945, trans. R. H. Barry (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964).

3 The more notable of these apologist writings are Felix Steiner, Die Armee der Geächteten (Göttingen: Plesse Verlag, 1963); Paul Hausser, Waffen-SS im Einsatz (Göttingen: Plesse Verlag, 1953); Idem, Soldaten wie andere auch: Der Weg der Waffen-SS (Osnabrück: Munin Verlag, 1966).

4 George H. Stein, The Waffen-SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966).

5 James J. Weingartner, Hitler's Guard: The Story of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974); Charles W. Sydnor Jr., Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945 (Princeton University Press, 1977).

6 For a survey of the most recent literature on the Waffen-SS see Bernd Wegner, "Die Garde des 'Führers' und die 'Feuerwehr' der Ostfront: Zur neueren Literatur über die Waffen-SS," Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen 23 (1978): 210-236.

7 Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere (Munich: Schild Verlag, 1957).

8 Charles P. Stacey, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, vol. 3: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945 (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960).

9 W. T. Barnard, The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, 1860-1960 (Don Mills, Ontario: The Ontario Publishing Co. Ltd., 1960), p. 197.

10 Will R. Bird, No Retreating Footsteps: The Story of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Kentville Publishing Co., 1956), p. 96.

11 Eversley Belfield and H. Essame, The Battle for Normandy (Severn House Publishers, 1975), p. 150.

12 Gerhard Rempel, "The Misguided Generation: Hitler Youth and SS, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971).

13 Roger James Bender and Hugh Page Taylor, Uniforms, Organization and History of the Waffen-SS, 4 vols. (San Jose, California: R. James

Bender Publishing, 1969-1975), 3(1972): 96-133.

14 Jean Mabire, Les Jeunes fauves du Fuehrer: La Division SS Hitlerjugend dans la bataille de Normandie (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1976).

15 Figures relating to the recruitment, strength, and casualties of the division have been particularly difficult to obtain for this study.

CHAPTER I

THE FORMATION OF THE DIVISION

The idea of creating an entire German division composed of adolescent recruits from the Hitler Youth was first put forward in early 1943. Yet to understand properly the events surrounding the formation of the Hitler Youth Division, one must delve back further into the past and examine the background and development of the organizations which were ultimately responsible for the creation of such a unit -- the SS and the Waffen-SS.

The history of the SS can be traced back to the spring of 1925, when Adolf Hitler decided that he required a small but reliable body-guard. As a result, a group of loyal followers was brought together in April of that year to form the Schutzstaffel (Protection Squad) or SS. The SS remained a relatively obscure organization until 1929, when Hitler appointed Heinrich Himmler as its new leader. Despite his eccentric racial ideas, Himmler proved to be a man of unusual organizational abilities, whose driving ambition was only matched by his complete and utter loyalty to the Fuehrer. Under his leadership, the SS was expanded and reorganized to assume extensive police and intelligence functions within the Nazi Party as a whole. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Himmler was gradually able to use his own political skills and the trust shown in him by Hitler to transform the SS into a vast heterogeneous empire with a multitude of activities and responsibilities. By 1943, the SS not only controlled the entire German police force, and the entire concentration camp system, but it had also expanded its activities into the occupied territories of Europe to include such tasks as popula-

lation resettlement, anti-partisan operations, and most importantly, the extermination of the European Jews. The influence of the SS had even extended itself into the sphere of military operations, where divisions of the Waffen-SS fought shoulder to shoulder with units of the regular German Army.[1]

The term Waffen-SS was first used in 1940 as the official designation for the combat troops of the SS. Yet the actual origins of the Waffen-SS date back to the spring of 1933, when several armed SS formations were created for security and ceremonial purposes. The first such formation to be organized was Hitler's personal SS bodyguard, the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (SS Bodyguard Regiment "Adolf Hitler"). In the months following his appointment as German Chancellor, Hitler had reached the conclusion that the SS had become too large to fulfill its original task of ensuring his personal protection. He therefore ordered SS Major-General Josef "Sepp" Dietrich to establish a new guard formation from amongst a small number of reliable SS men, who were to be trained and equipped as a military unit.[2]

Shortly after the creation of the Leibstandarte, two other militarized formations were organized along similar lines by the SS. One was made up of a number of heavily-armed police units known as Political Alarm Squads (Politische Bereitschaften). The other formation was made up of the armed detachments of guards at SS concentration camps, which were known as the SS Death's Head Detachments (SS-Totenkopfverbände).[3]

It was the Leibstandarte, the Political Alarm Squads, and the SS Death's Head Detachments which were used by Hitler to carry out the executions of prominent SA leaders during the summer of 1934. The important part played by these militarized units in the purge of the SA

prompted Himmler to suggest that they should be expanded and reorganized into a standing armed force for internal police tasks. With Hitler's approval, the first step was taken in this direction in September 1934, when the Leibstandarte and Political Alarm Squads were merged to form the nucleus of the future Waffen-SS, the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS Special Duty Troops).[4]

The exact purpose of the Verfügungstruppe (VT) remained publicly unclear for several years. Himmler maintained that the VT was intended to be a militarized state police force responsible for the internal security of the German Reich. However, the fact that it was subsequently trained and equipped to fight as a sizeable combat-ready infantry unit suggested that it was actually destined to perform more than simple police tasks. The legal status and actual purpose of the VT were finally clarified by Hitler in a secret decree of August 1938, which announced that the VT was neither a part of the police, nor a part of the armed forces. It was to be a standing armed force solely at the disposal of the Fuehrer. As such, the VT could be used by Hitler to deal with internal emergencies, when it would then be placed under the operational control of the police. Or it could be used by Hitler in wartime as a regular combat formation, when it would be placed under the operational command of the Army. In either of these capacities, the VT acted only as Hitler's own private military force. It did not owe allegiance to the German state; it owed allegiance only to Hitler himself.[5]

The VT gradually evolved into a well-trained infantry unit in the years leading up to the Second World War. Recruits were selected by the SS, in cooperation with the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) from amongst those men who were subject to compulsory military service.

Since the VT was intended to represent an elite force of "political soldiers", only volunteers were accepted into its ranks.[6] Similarly, the racial "purity" of the VT was maintained by enforcing stringent racial and physical entrance requirements. SS examiners were so selective that Himmler would later claim that no man was accepted into the VT "if he had even one tooth filled."[7] The VT was therefore able to fill its ranks with hand-picked recruits in excellent physical condition.

The military training of the VT was also the responsibility of the SS. To coordinate all training activities, an SS Inspectorate of Verfügungstruppen was established in 1936, with SS Brigadier Paul Hausser, a retired major-general of the regular Army, as its head. The small size and superior personnel of the VT made it possible for Hausser to train and organize his SS troops into a flexible assault formation, similar in many ways to the British Commandos or U.S. Army Rangers. Considerable time was spent in the field, on the firing range, and in the classroom, with less attention being given to traditional barrack-square drill.[8] Particular emphasis was placed upon sports and physical exercise in an attempt to create a soldier who "was as much at home on the battlefield as on the athletic field."[9] The end result of such a training process was intended to be a force of military athletes "capable of more than average endurance on the march and in combat."[10]

In addition to its military training, the VT was also subjected to an intensive programme of indoctrination. As a force which owed unconditional obediance to Adolf Hitler, it was to be rendered into a unit which was politically and ideologically reliable. However, such indoctrination by no means converted the VT into a formation of fanatical Nazis. Most men tended to greet Himmler's racial and ideological fantasies with

indifference, preferring instead to concentrate upon their military training. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to claim that the programme of indoctrination had no effect at all upon the impressionable young men of the VT. Its glorification of war and violence, coupled with its stereotyped and dehumanized pictures of "the enemy", undoubtedly played a part in helping to mould the aggressive and sometimes brutal spirit which came to characterize the SS combat troops.[11]

Although the VT was able to obtain the services of several former Army officers, it was eventually forced to establish two SS Cadet Schools to meet its growing officer requirements. Entrance to these schools was not limited by educational restrictions as it was in the Army. Instead, a candidate need only have served for at least two years in the ranks before being considered for admission. While SS officers were therefore of a lower professional or educational quality than their colleagues in the Army, they did have a closer personal relationship with their men, helping to create a feeling of comradeship among all ranks generally unknown in the traditional armed forces.[12]

Graduates from SS Cadet Schools also distinguished themselves from their counterparts in the Army by the distinctive outlook or frame of mind which was deliberately cultivated among them. Young SS officers were trained to carry out all orders with blind obedience, and to do so with an often merciless disregard for traditional standards of conduct. Officers of all ranks were encouraged to lead their men into battle, displaying the same type of reckless, freebooter spirit which had characterized the post-World War One Free Corps movement. It was the tough, aggressive and often arrogant self-confidence of this emerging new generation of SS officers which would contribute significantly to

the distinctive elan and character of SS military units.[13]

As the Fuehrer's own private military force, it was not surprising that the VT took part in Hitler's moves to regain "lost" German territory in the 1930s. Elements of the VT, under the operational command of the Army, participated in the remilitarization of the Rhineland, and the occupation of Austria, the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia. With the outbreak of war in September 1939, the VT went into action in Poland, with its various regiments scattered amongst units of the regular Army. It seemed to many that the VT was emerging as the fourth branch of the Wehrmacht. To the Army, it appeared as if the VT was becoming a potential threat to its own jealously guarded position as the nation's "sole bearer of arms."

Despite appearances to the contrary, the VT technically remained a force which was separate from the Wehrmacht. Although it came under the OKW's operational control in the field, its administration, training, replacements and discipline still remained the responsibility of the SS. For pay purposes, the VT was still classified as a police formation whose funding came from the Ministry of the Interior and not from the Ministry of Defence.[14] Whether the VT was eventually intended by Hitler to replace the regular Army is not certain.[15] All that can be said is that the Army's position was never seriously threatened right up to the end of the Second World War. SS combat formations would never become large enough or sufficiently competent enough in all spheres of administration and logistics to form a truly independent military force.[16]

The commendable performance of the VT during the Polish campaign prompted Hitler to authorize the formation of three entire SS divisions as part of an overall expansion of the German armed forces.[17] Now known

collectively as the Waffen-SS, these divisions were employed during the campaign in France and the Low Countries and, with the creation of one additional division, in the Balkan campaign and the invasion of the Soviet Union. It was during these campaigns that SS divisions began to acquire a reputation for their unrivalled toughness in battle. Trained to attack as assault formations, they went into battle with unequalled determination, and with a speed and aggressiveness that bordered on the reckless.[18]

Yet it was only during the defensive battles on the eastern front in the winter of 1941-1942, that the Waffen-SS displayed "what was for Hitler to become its greatest virtue: the ability to retain its fighting spirit even in defeat."[19] Whereas several Army units panicked in the face of the unexpected Soviet counter-offensive, the Waffen-SS offered almost suicidal resistance to the enemy, mastering crises along several sectors of the front. Although their losses were extremely high, Hitler praised the outstanding fighting abilities of SS divisions, alleging that the Army lacked their leadership and determined fighting capacity.

It was this growing confidence in his SS divisions, coupled with the realization that the war was developing into a protracted struggle, which finally prompted Hitler to order a sizeable expansion and re-equipping of the Waffen-SS late in 1942. If the existing small number of SS divisions could accomplish such feats on the eastern front, Hitler reasoned that an expanded Waffen-SS, armed with the best weaponry, would be able to perform miracles for the German war effort. In November 1942, he ordered that the three best Waffen-SS divisions -- SS divisions "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler", "Das Reich", and "Totenkopf" -- be reinforced with tanks, assault guns, and armoured personnel carriers,

and redesignated as panzer grenadier divisions. One month later, Hitler ordered that two entirely new SS divisions were to be recruited from among Reich German recruits and also trained as elite panzer grenadier units.[20]

Finding a sufficient number of volunteers for these two divisions proved to be a major obstacle. In fact, since the very beginning of the war, the Waffen-SS had been plagued by serious manpower problems. Although it had been authorized by Hitler to form new divisions, it had never been given more than a small percentage of the German manpower pool by the OKW. That the Waffen-SS had still been able to expand to a strength of seven divisions by 1942 was primarily a result of the work done by SS Major-General Gottlob Berger, the ingenious head of the SS Main Office, and the recruiting chief for the SS. By late 1939, Berger had been able to obtain a sufficient number of troops for three SS divisions by using the men of the VT, as well as experienced personnel from the police and SS Death's Head Detachments. In 1940, he had found enough recruits for an additional division by accepting ethnic German volunteers from Western Europe, most notably from Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands. In 1941 and 1942, he had found a new source of manpower among the ethnic German populations of Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary, although the fighting quality of these volunteers was not as high as of Reich German recruits.

It was only in December 1942 that Hitler finally ordered the OKW to make available a sufficient number of Reich Germans from the class of 1925 to man the two new SS divisions which he had authorized. Yet ironically, an insufficient number of men volunteered from this age group to meet the new divisions' requirements. Berger was eventually forced to depart from the much-flaunted tradition of voluntarism in the Waffen-SS

by simply drafting seventy to eighty percent of the necessary personnel.[21]

By early 1943, Berger therefore found himself confronted by an unexpected dilemma concerning recruits for the Waffen-SS. Although Hitler had now shown himself to be favourably disposed toward making a sufficient number of Reich Germans available for an expansion of the Waffen-SS, the problems involved in getting the required number of these recruits to volunteer had also become evident. If the Waffen-SS intended to expand any further, and at the same time maintain its dependence upon volunteers, Berger realized that he would have to find a more reliable source of Reich German manpower. He appeared to have discovered just such a source in January 1943, when the suggestion was first put forward of creating an entire SS division from volunteers of the Hitler Youth.

The Hitler Youth was the Nazi Party's official youth organization. It had been established as far back as 1926, and had grown with the Party up to 1939, when membership in its ranks was made compulsory for all German boys and girls between the ages of ten and eighteen. The activities of the Hitler Youth revolved largely around sports, physical training, and political indoctrination. Activities for boys had become more military in character after 1939, reflecting the importance of the Hitler Youth as a reservoir of future manpower for the armed forces. In 1942, this stress upon military training had been intensified even more with the establishment of a large number of Hitler Youth Pre-Military Training Camps (Wehrertüchtigungslager). These camps were intended to provide seventeen and eighteen year old boys with physical and military training before they left the Hitler Youth to join the Reich Labour Service or perform their military service.[22]

The SS had endeavoured to secure some Hitler Youth recruits for its various formations before 1939, but most boys had remained surprisingly indifferent to SS appeals. With the outbreak of war and the expansion of SS combat formations, however, the Hitler Youth was increasingly recognized as being a potentially valuable manpower pool for SS military units. The Hitler Youth's systematic indoctrination and rigorous disciplining were considered to be the best possible preparation for the aggressive type of combat performance expected within the Waffen-SS. Hence, the SS stepped up its endeavours to obtain "reliable" cannon fodder from the ranks of the Hitler Youth after 1939. Annual recruiting campaigns were organized in cooperation with the Hitler Youth leadership. In addition, SS trainers were sent to Pre-Military Training Camps to influence young boys into volunteering. Through such means the SS was able to recruit a considerable number of boys during the early years of the war.[23] Yet such recruits joined only as individuals and were scattered amongst the various divisions of the Waffen-SS. No attempt was made to maintain their former connections with the Hitler Youth organization.[24]

It was only in 1943 that the idea first emerged of creating an entire Waffen-SS division composed of Hitler Youths. This idea has usually been credited to the Reich Youth Leader, Artur Axmann, who was said to have approached Himmler with the offer of Hitler Youth volunteers early in 1943.[25] Nevertheless, Axmann's alleged role as the key figure behind the idea of the division was jealously disputed by Gottlob Berger. In a letter to Himmler's personal aide in July 1943, Berger insisted that the idea for the division had come originally from him. He claimed that he had been forced to carry out secret negotiations with Axmann's

chief of staff, Helmut Möckel, in order to avoid expected resistance to the idea from within the Hitler Youth leadership. Berger maintained that it was only after Hitler had expressed interest in a Hitler Youth Division that Axmann had actually begun to cooperate in the plan.[26]

There is insufficient evidence to establish with certainty whether Berger's claims were indeed correct. However, his story would appear to be supported by the fact that the first recorded discussion concerning the Hitler Youth Division was held between Berger and Möckel on February 9, 1943. In this discussion, the first tentative suggestions were exchanged concerning the recruitment and organization of the proposed Hitler Youth Division. It was agreed that members of the division would be recruited from Hitler Youths of the class of 1926. Training would involve six weeks in the Pre-Military Training Camps of the Hitler Youth, four weeks in the Reich Labour Service, and sixteen weeks of basic military training under SS auspices. Möckel stated that the Reich Youth Leadership would be responsible for finding reserves for the division without seriously affecting the reinforcements for other SS divisions. In addition, he endeavoured to satisfy the division's officer requirements by offering to recruit Hitler Youth leaders who had already had combat experience as battalion and company commanders in the Army. Berger, in turn, agreed to supply all regimental commanders from the ranks of the Waffen-SS. Indeed, as the commander of the division Berger enthusiastically nominated himself, telling Himmler "it is the first and only time in my life that I have suggested myself for something."[27] Berger was apparently dazzled by the prospect of becoming the commander of what promised to be one of the elite new divisions of the Waffen-SS.

On February 10, 1943, Himmler saw Hitler at his headquarters in East Prussia and discussed the idea of the Hitler Youth Division with him. Three days later, he wrote to Axmann to announce that the Fuehrer had been delighted with the proposal. Not only had he given his authorization to begin recruiting volunteers for the division immediately, but he had also hinted that the volunteers might be allowed to join up without having to fulfill their Labour Service requirements first. Hitler had also liked the idea of conferring the name "Herbert Norkus"* on one of its regiments; however, he did not make any final decisions on the matter. Himmler therefore informed Axmann that he could proceed with the organization of the division, and that he could settle all details for recruitment and mustering with Gottlob Berger.[28]

At the same time, Himmler wrote to Berger, telling him that while he agreed with most of his suggestions for the division, he could not accept his request to be made its commander: "I can understand your wish very well. But you know, dear Berger, that I need you for other things. I believe that our time will soon come in this hard war. Please do not become impatient with me."[29] Berger seemingly reconciled himself to Himmler's decision, for no more was said about his heroic desires to become an SS field commander.

The first actual planning conference for the new division was held on February 16, 1943, at Hitler Youth headquarters in Berlin. Representing the Hitler Youth at the meeting were Axmann, Möckel, and the head of the Hitler Youth's Office for Pre-Military Training, Dr.

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* Herbert Norkus was a Hitler Youth martyr who had been killed by communists in 1932.

Ernst Schlunder. Representing the SS were Berger, as well as the head of the SS Recruiting Office, SS Brigadier Jürs, and his deputy, SS Major Brill. These six men concerned themselves with the questions of the entrance qualifications, recruitment, and training of the division, as well as the problem of finding a sufficient number of qualified officers to meet its requirements.

It was decided that the division would accept volunteers from the class of 1926, who were a minimum height of 1.70 meters for the infantry, and 1.68 meters for reconnaissance, motorcycle and tank units. The only other requirements were that the boys be "fit for service" and, where possible, also have the Hitler Youth Achievement Medal. However, it was pointed out that a Fuehrer decree or an agreement with the OKW would be needed to recruit boys who had not yet reached their seventeenth birthday.

The Hitler Youth representatives indicated that they would place at the disposal of the SS 30,000 boys who had already been closely examined by Hitler Youth physicians. The Hitler Youth Regional Directorates were then to cooperate with local SS Recruiting Stations in having all of them mustered by SS Acceptance Commissions between March 15 and April 1. It was also indicated that, in exceptional cases, even students or apprentices who had not yet finished their schooling or training could be mustered into the division. The Hitler Youth would then assume responsibility for any difficulties that might arise in such cases.

It was agreed that all those who met the necessary entrance requirements would be inducted on April 4 into the thirty-nine Hitler Youth Pre-Military Training Camps staffed by SS trainers. Here they

would receive six weeks of instruction, and would be issued with their uniforms and equipment. They would then go directly to the Waffen-SS, their Labour Service requirement apparently having been officially waived by the Fuehrer.

With regard to officers for the division, the Hitler Youth representatives indicated that they would be able to satisfy most of the requirements. Of the 800 commissioned officers and 4,500 non-commissioned officers needed, they claimed that they could supply 400 of the former, and 2,500 of the latter, from Hitler Youth leaders serving in the reserves of the Army and Air Force. However, they would also need a Fuehrer decree to obtain the transfer of these men from the Army and Air Force reserves to the ranks of the Waffen-SS.[30]

The results of this first planning conference were enthusiastically announced by Axmann to all Hitler Youth regional leaders, who had assembled for a regularly scheduled meeting in Berlin on February 17. Axmann stated that the Hitler Youth Division was intended to be a "Guard of the Fuehrer", alongside the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. It would be "fully motorized, equipped with the heaviest weapons, and led mostly by Hitler Youth leaders." The division would accept volunteers from the Hitler Youth who had reached the age of seventeen by June 30, 1943. Parental agreement was deemed to be "unnecessary", the "decisive factors" being only that the boys possess "enthusiasm" and "eagerness for action". Axmann announced that the Pre-Military Training courses for the division would begin on April 4. As a result, the Hitler Youth regional leaders were ordered to carry out a vigorous recruiting campaign, and to have their Hitler Youth Division contingents ready by March 15, so that SS Recruiting Stations could examine these boys before

the end of the month.[31] Barely a month and a half was therefore given to the Hitler Youth leaders in which to recruit and assemble an entire division.

With recruiting for the division set in motion, a second planning conference between Hitler Youth and SS officials was held on March 8 at the SS Main Office in Berlin. Present at the meeting were Berger, Brill, Möckel, and SS Major-General von Herff, chief of the SS Personnel Office. It was announced at this meeting that the Fuehrer had agreed to release 2,000 Hitler Youth leaders in the class of 1925 from their Labour Service requirement, thereby making them eligible as officer candidates for the Hitler Youth Division. These candidates were also to be sent to Pre-Military Training Camps on April 4 to receive a four-week refresher course, and would thereafter be used as training assistants to help regular SS instructors in other Pre-Military Training Camps. On May 1, 8,000 mustered Hitler Youth recruits would then be inducted into these camps and given six weeks of training. This would be completed by June 15, when the 8,000 recruits would be transferred to Waffen-SS status and replaced by a further 8,000 recruits. At the same time, the 2,000 training assistants would be sent to SS Cadet Schools to be trained as NCOs for the division. Thus, by September 1, the Hitler Youth Division would have 16,000 recruits and 2,000 trained NCO candidates at its disposal.

An attempt to solve the problem of commissioned officers for the division was made by von Herff, who suggested that Himmler's approval should be obtained to transfer 160 former Hitler Youth leaders serving as NCOs and enlisted men in other Waffen-SS units. These men would then be sent through a special officer training course, and those who failed

could still be used as NCOs for the division.[32]

A surprising oversight at the meeting of March 8 was the fact that the head of the SS Operations Department, SS General Hans Jüttner, had not been invited. Jüttner was responsible for the training and organization of all Waffen-SS units, and would be directly affected by the proposed transfer of Hitler Youth leaders from other Waffen-SS divisions. It is possible that the devious Berger had hoped to bypass Jüttner, and speed up the formation of the division by obtaining the necessary orders directly from Himmler. In the end, he succeeded only in arousing Jüttner's resentment and hostility to any of Berger's plans concerning the Hitler Youth Division.

On March 10, Jüttner addressed an angry letter to Berger, stating: "I would have expected that in such an important discussion as the one which took place, I myself, or a representative of the SS Operations Department, would have been included." Jüttner then proceeded to explain that Berger simply did not understand the nature of the officer problem in the Waffen-SS. He pointed out that all Hitler Youth leaders serving in the Waffen-SS were automatically considered officer candidates. As such, they represented a considerable portion of the officer recruits and officer replacements for existing Waffen-SS divisions. Jüttner stated that these officer candidates were desperately needed, not only because the casualty rates in existing field divisions were extremely high, but also because the officer requirements of the newly-established 9th and 10th SS Divisions had to be filled. Furthermore, Jüttner pointed out that officer candidates had to meet certain requirements concerning training time and front-line experience before they were qualified to be sent to SS Cadet

Schools. As a result, Jüttner claimed that the proposed transfer of 600 Hitler Youth leaders to the Hitler Youth Division could only be carried out gradually. The replacement needs of existing divisions and the requirements of newly-established divisions made it impossible to use two-thirds of the SS Cadet School capacity simply to satisfy the needs of the Hitler Youth Division. Indeed, Jüttner stated that in light of the shortage of trained officers within the Waffen-SS, his office could at most supply only half of the requirements for the division. The other half "would have to be acquired in some other way."[33]

It is not certain how much Jüttner's hostility and indignation contributed to the officer problems which would plague the Hitler Youth Division in the months to come. Berger did attempt to remedy the damage done by his independent actions. In a letter to Jüttner on March 20, he admitted that he had not understood all the obstacles involved in obtaining officers for the Hitler Youth Division, and confessed that his plan did create several problems. Jüttner should bear in mind, though, that the Hitler Youth Division had to be set up by the SS: "for if we [the SS] do not do it, then the Army or Reich Marshall Goering will do it with great pleasure."[34]

Berger's concern that the Army or Air Force might establish its own Hitler Youth Division was apparently not without foundation. This was revealed in a letter from Himmler to Brigadier Rudolf Schmundt, Hitler's senior military adjutant, on March 22. Himmler indicated that he had learned from the Fuehrer that Schmundt had made the suggestion to form a Hitler Youth Division under the auspices of the Army. Himmler pointed out that Schmundt must certainly have failed

to notice that the SS had already commenced recruiting for such a division. He politely concluded, the idea of a Hitler Youth Division must have been conveyed to Schmundt by some office of the Army "without realizing that the idea had already been introduced by me and approved by the Fuehrer."[35] Himmler's letter appears to have had the desired effect, for no further attempt was made by the Army to set up its own special division of Hitler Youths.

Recruiting for the Hitler Youth Division began as early as the third week of February at the regional and district levels of the Hitler Youth. The recruiting campaign for the division was integrated into a larger SS recruiting project which was to be carried out between February and April. This project was expected to produce over 30,000 recruits from the Hitler Youth for the recently-formed 9th and 10th SS Divisions, as well as 20,000 recruits for the Hitler Youth Division. Axmann apparently endeavoured to mobilize the entire Party apparatus to assist in this massive campaign. Political leaders were encouraged to explain the "meaning of the Waffen-SS as the Party's only arms bearer" to the rank-and-file, and to remove any objections parents might have to their sons joining the Waffen-SS.[36]

However, the organization and recruitment of the Hitler Youth Division were to be carried out with as much secrecy as possible. The Hitler Youth leadership feared that public notice of the division might raise fears that a second Langemarck unit* was being formed, which

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* In November 1914, the young and inexperienced troops of the 26th Reserve Corps of the Fourth German Army had been decimated in an attempt to take the Belgian village of Langemarck.

possessed "boundless enthusiasm, but inadequate training." There was also concern that publicizing the division could provide ammunition for enemy propaganda. The Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, was particularly uneasy about the possible enemy response to the division's proposed name of "Hitler-Jugend": "I regard this name as very unfortunate. It certainly will not help our cause, for the simple reason that other nations will conclude we are already drafting youth to have sufficient manpower for waging our war."[37] The secrecy order concerning the Hitler Youth Division was therefore enforced as late as November 1943 -- units of the division which appeared in public were simply described as being "Waffen-SS volunteers" without specifically mentioning the name of the division.[38]

The usual recruitment procedure for the division at the district level was for the Hitler Youth to invite all sixteen and seventeen year olds in a given area to a meeting. At this meeting, each boy would be given a health examination, and would then be subjected to a propaganda speech from an SS recruiter. In some areas, the SS would also show a small film entitled "Leaders of the Waffen-SS" or send a highly decorated SS veteran to talk to the boys. It was hoped that by such area roll calls, the SS would be able to sift through all the qualified boys in a given district and secure the required number of volunteers.[39]

Despite the thoroughness of such recruiting procedures, most boys were extremely slow to respond to the idea of joining the Hitler Youth Division. Recruiters cited several reasons for this lack of response. Some pointed to the concern about the high losses of the Waffen-SS and its engagement on difficult sectors of the front. Others cited the pronounced anti-Waffen-SS attitude in Catholic regions.

Still others pointed to the stringent entrance requirements which both discouraged and disqualified many boys from joining. There was also the problem that most sixteen and seventeen year old boys would not be finished with their schooling by March, and did not wish to interrupt their education in order to enlist.[40]

This disappointing response caused the starting date for the Pre-Military Training Camps to be moved from April 4 to May 1. In addition, the Hitler Youth leadership endeavoured to solve the problems related to schooling. In March, an agreement was reached with the National Business Chamber to allow vocational students completing their training in the autumn to take an early examination in April.[41] The problems concerning non-vocational students were more complex, and the SS was eventually forced to intervene. In May, Berger finally reached an agreement with the Ministry of Education that students who joined the Hitler Youth Division could either be given a premature school leaving certificate if they were already in Class Seven, or they could be promoted prematurely to Class Seven if they were still in Class Six.[42]

The postponement of the starting date for the Pre-Military Training Camps, coupled with the new schooling arrangements, did produce a larger number of volunteers for the Hitler Youth Division after March. Yet it was still not deemed sufficient to meet the division's requirements. The result was that an increasing number of boys were actually coerced into "volunteering". On March 30, Army reserve authorities in Stuttgart complained to the OKW that the Waffen-SS was using illegal means to obtain volunteers for the Hitler Youth Division. Three instances were cited in which Hitler Youths had been imprisoned in a room guarded by SS soldiers until they had consented to sign volunteer papers. The reserve authorities claimed

that: "It would be totally false . . . if the Fuehrer were under the impression that he was dealing with purely voluntary recruits."[43]

Such instances of coercion were apparently not isolated occurrences. This was particularly the case with respect to NCO candidates for the division. It had originally been hoped that a sufficient number of Hitler Youth leaders would volunteer to meet most of the division's NCO requirements. However, the discouraging response to recruiting efforts had finally prompted Axmann to call upon his subordinates to "pressure" as many Hitler Youth leaders as possible to enlist as NCO candidates. As a result, many such leaders were commandeered for the division, rather than being allowed to volunteer freely. Axmann, of course, recognized that such drafted "volunteers" might not provide the spirit and elan needed for an elite division. He therefore ordered all Pre-Military Training Camps training NCO candidates to determine how many men had in fact been coerced into joining. He then submitted these individuals to a fresh barrage of propaganda in the hope that they would see the light and volunteer of their own free will. Those who still refused were excluded from NCO candidacy, although it is not clear whether they were required to remain in the Hitler Youth Division as enlisted men.[44]

It cannot be determined how many boys were actually coerced to join the Hitler Youth Division. Kurt Meyer, a future commander of the division, would later claim that many members had not volunteered freely.[45] This was corroborated by the fact that the division's first commander, SS Brigadier Witt, ordered an investigation into reports that several men had been coerced into enlisting.[46] Altogether, enough evidence exists to disprove claims by several authors that the Hitler Youth Division was made up solely of fanatical volunteers.

Despite the many problems involved in recruiting the division, the first 6,000 recruits were finally inducted into the Hitler Youth Pre-Military Training Camps staffed by SS instructors at the beginning of May.[47] Here they were subjected to physical exercises, terrain maneuvers, target practice, and large doses of political indoctrination. The emphasis upon political indoctrination was of special significance considering the fact that it was carried out upon impressionable young teenagers about to embark upon a so-called "war of ideas".[48]

By the end of May, these boys had completed their training and were the first contingent to be transferred to the Waffen-SS. During an elaborate ceremony marking this occasion, Himmler announced that the unit these boys would be joining was now to be known by its official designation as the SS Panzer Grenadier Division "Hitlerjugend". At the same ceremony, Axmann reminded the young recruits that:

> You are the elite of German youth and I am happy and lucky [sic] that not one of you is here except by his own free will [sic!] . . . . In your unit, my comrades, the soldierly tradition of the Hitler Youth will find its ultimate expression. That is the reason why all German youths direct their attention to this unit, to you; that is why you must embody the virtues inherent in the best of Germany's youth. So, we expect you to be idealistic, selfless, courageous and loyal![49]

The division was originally intended to be formally organized by June 1, 1943. However, the delays in the recruiting campaign eventually caused the target date to be postponed by several weeks. It was not until June 24, that the formal organizational order was issued by the SS Operations Department, which assigned the division to the troop training grounds at Beverloo, north-west of Brussels. For tactical purposes, the division was subordinated to Army Group D; for training instructions, it was subordinated to Panzer Group West.[50]

Hitler apparently intended that the Hitler Youth Division should form the sister division of the crack Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. To facilitate this, the I. SS Panzer Corps was created on July 27. It was to be made up of the Leibstandarte and the Hitler Youth Division, and led by the Leibstandarte's veteran commander, SS General Sepp Dietrich. Since the staff of the corps would need extensive training, it did not become truly operational until the spring of 1944, and would therefore play only a small role in the training of the Hitler Youth Division.[51]

In addition to the formation of the I. SS Panzer Corps, it was also decided to extract the senior officers for the Hitler Youth Division from the Leibstandarte's cadre of veteran officers. On July 1, SS Senior Colonel Fritz Witt, the commander of the Leibstandarte's 1st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, was named the first commander of the Hitler Youth Division. Witt was typical of the young new breed of officers emerging in the Waffen-SS. Born in 1908, he had joined the SS and the Nazi Party in 1931, and had become one of the first commissioned officers in the newly-formed Leibstandarte in 1933. Two years later, he had transferred to the SS Regiment "Deutschland" and had risen to become a battalion commander by 1939. During the campaign in France, he had received the Knight's Cross, and was transferred back to the Leibstandarte in October 1940. He had eventually become commander of the Leibstandarte's 1st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and had received the Oakleaves for his part in the reconquest of Kharkov in the spring of 1943. After his appointment as commander of the Hitler Youth Division, Witt was promoted to the rank of SS Brigadier in the spring of 1944, thereby becoming one of the youngest generals in the German armed forces at the age of 36.[52]

Along with Witt came another dashing, young officer from the Leibstandarte, SS Colonel Kurt Meyer, who took over the Hitler Youth

Division's 1st Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Only two years younger than Witt, Meyer had worked for the Mecklenburg Gendarmerie before becoming a member of the SS and the Nazi Party in 1930. He had joined the Leibstandarte in 1934, and had risen to become commander of its reconnaissance detachment by 1939. Meyer had first revealed his military ability during the invasion of Greece, where he had received the Knight's Cross for his part in the capture of the important Klissura Pass. During the Russian campaign, his exploits at the head of the Leibstandarte's reconnaissance battalion had earned for him the name of "Panzermeyer", and he had been awarded the Oakleaves in the spring of 1943.[53]

While Witt and Meyer were the two most notable officers from the Leibstandarte to be transferred to the Hitler Youth Division, it has been estimated that almost one thousand officers, NCOs, and specialists from Hitler's guard were eventually transferred to the new division.[54] This massive influx of veteran personnel from the Leibstandarte would play an important part in helping to mould the same elan and aggressive spirit in the Hitler Youth Division which had come to characterize the elite, veteran divisions of the Waffen-SS.

Along with the officers from the Leibstandarte, fifty former Hitler Youth leaders serving as officers in the Army were also transferred to the division.[55] This succeeded in filling out most of the division's officer cadre by the end of July. All of the officers were surprisingly young, with even the senior staff being only in their early thirties. Most officers below the battalion level were rarely over the age of twenty-five.[56]

The division's NCOs were even younger than its officers, some being no more than eighteen or nineteen years of age. Berger had been

unable to solve the long-standing problem of finding a sufficient number of experienced squad and platoon leaders to meet the division's requirements. In the end, the required number of NCOs had simply been selected from amongst the inexperienced rank-and-file recruits. A considerable number of NCOs were therefore no older than the seventeen year olds who made up the bulk of the division's enlisted men.[57]

The extraordinary youthfulness of the entire division was the cause of some concern in higher military circles. It was feared that the young recruits might not be able to withstand the physical strain of actual combat conditions.[58] However, Hitler had no such worries. In a conference on July 26, 1943, he remarked to Himmler how pleased he was with the performance of Hitler Youths fighting in the 9th and 10th SS Divisions:

Hitler: The young people who come from the Hitler Youth fight fanatically. . . . young German lads, some only sixteen years old. These Hitler Youths fight more fanatically than their older comrades. . . . the enemy reports that they only capture them after every man has fallen. Thus, if these divisions all fight like these two SS divisions, --

Himmler: They are good divisions now, my Fuehrer.

Hitler: The Hitler Youth Division will fight in the same way, like the rest of youth. . . . The enemy will be struck with wonder.[59]

In July and August 1943, the first 10,000 boys arrived at the troop training grounds at Beverloo, although preparations for receiving them were far from complete. The various sub-units of the division had not even been established, and it required several months before the division's artillery regiment, panzer regiment and two panzer grenadier regiments were finally organized.[60]

The training of the division was also hampered from the outset by serious shortages of weapons and equipment. Most of the boys could

not be issued with their uniforms when they first arrived at Beverloo. The artillery regiment possessed only several light field howitzers for training purposes. The panzer regiment had only four Mark IV and four Panther tanks with which to begin its practice, and these had been smuggled out of the Soviet Union by former members of the Leibstandarte. Half-tracks and motor vehicles of any kind were also in short supply.[61]

On November 3, Hitler was apparently made aware of the shortages plaguing the Hitler Youth Division, for he ordered that it be "fully equipped immediately".[62] As a result, during November and December, the division was supplied with captured Italian vehicles and a number of prime movers and armoured cars to bring it up to eighty percent of its authorized strength.[63] Yet the Italian vehicles were only of limited assistance since most proved to be mechanically unreliable. Almost all of them had to be repaired before they could even be used, and a shortage of spare parts resulted in the region around Beverloo becoming littered with broken-down vehicles.[64]

The division's motor vehicle problems were compounded by the fact that there was a dire shortage of motor fuel. The division's engineer battalion, for example, was forced simply to discontinue its driver training in February and March 1944, because of fuel shortages. When fuel was finally delivered in April, it was only enough to allow one company of the battalion's armoured cars to carry out a few limited training exercises.[65]

Despite such difficulties, the division was still able to progress with its training schedule. During the autumn and early winter of 1943, the major preoccupation was with basic boot-camp training. In this, the Hitler Youth Division was using the same procedures as most other Waffen-SS divisions had since the time of the Verfügungstruppe. Little time

was devoted to traditional parade square drills or target practice on the shooting range. Instead, emphasis was placed upon simulating as closely as possible actual combat conditions. Target practice was carried out during exercises in the field. Live ammunition was used whenever possible during training. Sports were used to build up the boys' physical endurance. When possible, orders were phrased to indicate the reasoning behind them so that the soldiers' performance would be maximized. Everything was geared towards turning the division into an effective fighting formation in the shortest possible time.[66]

In October 1943, the structure of the division was altered somewhat when Hitler ordered that it be transformed into a panzer division. Since the division, like other SS panzer grenadier formations, already possessed an armoured regiment, the change-over was very nominal, involving only the acquisition of additional technical personnel.[67] At the same time as its change-over to a panzer division, the Hitler Youth Division was also given the number "12" as part of the new sequential numbering of all divisions of the Waffen-SS. It therefore received its new official designation as the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend". The regimental numbers were also changed in accordance with the new system, so that they were now known as the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, the 12th SS Panzer Artillery Regiment, and the 25th and 26th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiments.[68]

During the early months of 1944, training began on the platoon, company and battalion levels, and by the late spring had progressed to the regimental level. At the instigation of Lt.-General Geyr von Schweppenburg, the commander of Panzer Group West, special attention was now given to preparing for battle conditions which could be expected during an allied invasion of France. Combat exercises were carried out

regularly during the night and early dawn, in expectation of the fact that German daytime movements would be limited by allied air superiority. Special consideration was given to preparing for enemy airborne operations in the belief that the allies would make use of large-scale air landings. Stress was also placed upon anti-tank tactics, close-combat, the use of trenches, and camouflage, in anticipation of the type of fighting which could be expected in light of the allied material superiority in tanks and heavy weaponry.[69]

Despite the urgency of transforming the division into an efficient military unit in the shortest possible time, provision was still made in the training schedule for several hours of ideological indoctrination per week. Fritz Witt advanced two basic reasons for the importance of such indoctrination. First, he claimed that Germany had lost the First World War because it did not possess a coherent political ideology and did not have a corps of determined political leaders. Second, he maintained that the war with the Soviet Union had confronted Germany with an enemy who was fanaticized by an idea, and who could only be defeated by the bearer of a superior ideology. Hence, Witt stated that every soldier in the Hitler Youth Division would not only have to be well trained with his weapons, but would also have to be instructed on what he was fighting for. Every man in the division would have to be "a convinced bearer of an ideology."[70]

Prime responsibility for political indoctrination in the Hitler Youth Division was entrusted to the company commanders. They were expected to set aside two hours per week for ideological instruction in their respective units. Topics of instruction included such familiar themes as: "The Enemies of Germany and the Enemies of Europe"; "Germany's Demand for Living Space"; "The Waffen-SS as a Formation of

'Political Soldiers'"; "The Waffen-SS as the Carrier of the Volk's Ideology, Blood, Communal Spirit, and Political Will". At the end of each week, commanders were expected to conduct a one hour discussion on current political questions and their implications. Discussions and lectures would then be supplemented on Sunday, during the men's recreation hour, by poems, films and songs. Every opportunity -- whether a pause in battle training or an off-duty hour -- was then to be used by all officers and NCOs "to explain and clarify the meaning of the weekly themes to the men."[71] The impressionable boys of the Hitler Youth Division were therefore subjected constantly to political and ideological indoctrination throughout their many months at Beverloo.

The youthfulness of the recruits did create unusual problems during the division's training. Because the boys' bodies were still developing physically, it was found necessary to provide them with special rations, containing more sugar and milk than normal army rations.[72] Furthermore, those boys who were younger than the class of 1923 were to be given a candy ration in lieu of a regular cigarette ration. In fact, these boys were forbidden to smoke entirely, and the records of the division are sprinkled with reports of boys who were punished for failing to obey this order.[73] Apparently they were considered to be too young to smoke, but old enough to die in battle.

The young age of the recruits also led to several problems with respect to discipline. There were numerous instances of motor vehicle accidents resulting from excessive speeds and reckless behaviour on the roads. There were also increasing complaints of theft, both from fellow soldiers and from civilians in nearby Belgian villages. More serious were the incidents in which the boys childishly used their weapons in off-duty hours.[74]

Nevertheless, most of the crimes or infractions within the division were only of a very minor nature, and were primarily a reflection of the immaturity of the majority of the troops. Only two instances are mentioned in the division's records of persons actually being executed for serious offences: One was an SS Sergeant found guilty of homosexuality;[75] the other was a soldier found guilty of "desertion, plundering, manslaughter and dangerous use of a weapon."[76]

Many company commanders and NCOs appear to have had no sympathetic understanding for the youthful excesses of their subordinates. Enlisted men were often threatened with drastic and severe punishments for seemingly insignificant offences. In one instance, a soldier deserted after stealing a cigarette because of his fear of punishment. Several NCOs endeavoured to discipline their men by resorting to very unusual methods. Cases were reported of midnight roll-calls, cleaning weapons between one and three in the morning, shaving men's heads, and even of electrifying door handles and making the offenders grasp hold of them. In at least one instance, a recruit was actually killed during a punishment known as the "Holy Ghost".[77]

Fritz Witt responded angrily to such instances of unusual punishment. Several NCOs were arrested and given harsh jail sentences for having mishandled their men. Witt also issued a "Special Order" to all unit leaders on April 4, 1944, which stated that: "The large increase of offences against soldierly discipline and order, especially in the recent period, shows that many unit leaders have not realized that, next to the work of training our men, their major task lies in the education of the young soldiers into upright and respectable SS men." Witt complained that most company commanders had simply failed to take the needs and problems of their youthful recruits into consideration.

They had failed to recognize that most of these boys had grown up under the shadow of the war, with their fathers away in the armed forces, and their mothers often unable to give them adequate attention. As a result, Witt instructed all unit leaders to set an example for these boys, and to try and fill the gap that had existed in their home life. All platoon and squad leaders were therefore ordered to move in with their men, to show that they cared about the welfare of their subordinates, even when off-duty. If every NCO appreciated "the valuable human material that was entrusted to him", then Witt believed that the problem of discipline and order within the division would be solved.[78]

It has been claimed by a former Waffen-SS general that most boys in the Hitler Youth Division had come from the ranks of the working class. He maintains that these boys "had stood at the work bench, and on weekends they had steeled their youthful bodies through competitive sport."[79] However, the records of the division show that these boys came from a wide variety of vocational backgrounds. Teachers, post office workers, high school students, trades apprentices, and agricultural labourers could all be found in company rosters, revealing that the division was not dominated by any one social group.[80] Moreover, although the Hitler Youth Division was intended to be composed primarily of Reich Germans, a small number of ethnic Germans from eastern and south-eastern Europe were also scattered amongst its ranks. Most came from Romania, South Tyrol, and Czechoslovakia, and in at least one instance, a Pole had been conscripted because of his height and Nordic features.[81]

By the early spring of 1944, training in the division had advanced to a point where combat exercises with live ammunition could

be carried out in the presence of the Inspector-General of Panzer Troops, Heinz Guderian, and the Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, both of whom subsequently acknowledged the division's "high level of performance."[82] On March 16, 1944, Witt recognized the successful progress of training within the division by announcing that:

> After almost eight months of hard work, we now stand directly before the conclusion of training in the division. The level of training can gratifyingly be termed as being high. In the course of these months, Hitler Youths have become men who understand the craft of war. I therefore lift all orders which forbid young men to smoke, for the entire division. Every man is to receive his allotted cigarette ration.[83]

On March 26, the division was placed under the direct command of the OKW as part of a special reserve being held in readiness for a possible allied invasion.[84] In April, it was finally transferred from the training ground at Beverloo to the Evreux-Bernay-Vimoutiers-Dreux area west of Paris. Here it was given considerable amounts of fuel to allow it to carry out combined-arms exercises at the battalion and regimental levels.[85] The month of May was spent concentrating primarily upon mobile operations involving reconnaissance, night-fighting, and flexible shifting from attack to defense. During one such exercise near Dieppe, the complete unreliability of the division's Italian vehicles became glaringly evident, which led to their replacement with German Army vehicles by order of "the highest authority."[86]

By the beginning of June, the delivery of these vehicles had been completed, and the division finally came close to reaching its authorized maximum strength. In terms of manpower, it possessed 520 officers, 2,383 NCOs, and 17,637 enlisted men, a total of 20,540 all ranks.[87] Its panzer regiment consisted of one battalion of Mark IV tanks, and one battalion of Panther tanks, approximately 177 tanks in all.[88] Since

panzer divisions in the regular German Army had a prescribed strength of approximately 14,000 men, and only 90 to 120 tanks,[89] the Hitler Youth Division was certainly a well-equipped armoured division, even by German standards.

One the eve of the allied invasion of Normandy, the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" therefore represented a formidable combat formation. In terms of manpower and armament, it was one of the strongest German divisions to be stationed in France. Although it had not been tried in battle, it had been subjected to almost a year of intensive, practical training under simulated combat conditions. It was also led by experienced senior officers of the elite Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, who brought not only their skill as soldiers, but also their reckless courage and determination to the new division.

Yet it was still not certain how the young soldiers of the division would perform in battle. In June 1944, the average age of the enlisted men in the division was eighteen, and a large number of NCOs were scarcely much older. Although such adolescent soldiers had fought well in other SS divisions, it still remained a novel experiment to send an entire division of such youngsters into combat. The young recruits had been well-trained, and equipped with the most modern instruments of war. Their "resolve" had also been strengthened by years of indoctrination in the Hitler Youth, and also within the division itself. It only remained to provide the young division with an opportunity to test its ability and determination in actual combat. Just such an opportunity would be provided when the allies launched their long-awaited invasion of the European continent.

NOTES - CHAPTER I

1 The history of the SS has been the subject of several detailed studies, the most notable of which are Martin Broszat, Hans Buchheim, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, and Helmut Krausnick, Anatomy of the SS State (New York: Walker and Company, 1968); Heinz Höhne, The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS (London: Pan Books, 1969); Ermenhild Neusüss-Hunkel, Die SS (Hanover and Frankfurt am Main: Norddeutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1956); Gerald Reitlinger, The SS: Alibi of a Nation, 1922-1945 (London: Heinemann, 1956).

2 James J. Weingartner, Hitler's Guard: The Story of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945 (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), pp. 4-10.

3 Broszat et al., Anatomy of the SS State, pp. 254-256. An examination of the early history of the SS Death's Head Detachments is provided in Charles W. Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 3-36.

4 There is some disagreement among historians as to the actual date when the SS-Verfügungstruppe was formed. In Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 15, the decision to form the VT is said to have been made at a meeting in September 1934. By contrast, the date is given as March 1935 in George H. Stein, The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 8. Another date, of December 1934, is given in Höhne, The Order of the Death's Head, p. 407.

5 Stein, The Waffen SS, pp. 20-21. It is possible that both Himmler and Hitler still intended the VT to serve primarily as an internal security force, but believed that it would have to be "blooded" at the front as a military unit in order to earn the respect of the German people. See Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 21.

6 The Waffen-SS would take much pride in its claim to be a force of volunteers. This is reflected by the title of the Waffen-SS veteranss magazine, Der Freiwillige (The Volunteer).

7 Cited in Stein, The Waffen SS, p. 10.

8 Ibid., p. 13.

9 Bundesverband der Soldaten der ehemaligen Waffen-SS, Wenn alle Brüder schweigen, 2nd ed. (Osnabrück: Munin Verlag, 1975), p. 26.

10 Felix Steiner, cited in Höhne, The Order of the Death's Head, p. 411.

11 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 26-29.

12 Stein, The Waffen SS, pp. 12-13. The difference in the educational backgrounds of SS and Army officers was accompanied in most instances by a corresponding difference in social backgrounds. This often resulted in a condescending attitude on the part of Army officers when dealing with their socially more humble SS counterparts. See Wenn alle Brüder schweigen, p. 24.

13 Stein, The Waffen SS, pp. 290-292; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 140-146. The similarities between the attitudes and spirit of Waffen-SS officers and those of the Free Corps movement are often very striking. For a description of Free Corps attitudes see Robert G. L. Waite, Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918-1923 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952).

14 Wolfdieter Bihl, "Zur Rechtstellung der Waffen-SS," Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau 16 (1966): 383-384.

15 It has been claimed by some that Hitler intended to replace the Wehrmacht with the Waffen-SS since the loyalty of the Wehrmacht was suspect in Hitler's mind. See, for example, Alfred Schickel, "Wehrmacht und SS," Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau 19 (1969): 241-264.

16 This is a major theme in Robert Gelwick, "Personnel Policies and Procedures of the Waffen-SS" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1971).

17 The Army criticized the performance of SS troops in Poland, however, because of their high casualties.

18 Stein, The Waffen SS, pp. 89-136.

19 Ibid., p. 287.

20 Ibid., pp. 202-203. The term "Panzergrenadier" was first used for all infantry in German Panzer divisions, but was later extended to cover all motorized infantry divisions. An SS panzer grenadier division normally had two panzer grenadier (motorized infantry) regiments, and one armoured regiment. See F. M. von Senger und Etterlin, Die Panzergrenadiere: Geschichte und Gestalt der mechanisierten Infanterie, 1930-1960 (Munich: J. F. Lehmann's Verlag, 1961); James Lucas and Matthew Cooper, Panzer Grenadiers (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977).

21 Roger James Bender and Hugh Page Taylor, Uniforms, Organization and History of the Waffen-SS, 4 vols. (San Jose, California: R. James Bender Publishing, 1969-1975), 3 (1972): 46.

22 For a detailed overview of the Hitler Youth, see H. W. Koch, The Hitler Youth, Origins and Development, 1922-1945 (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975); Arne Klönne, Hitlerjugend: Die Jugend und ihre Organisation im Dritten Reich (Hannover and Frankfurt am Main: Norddeutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1960).

23 For a survey of Hitler Youth - SS relations see Gerhard Rempel, "The Misguided Generation, Hitler Youth and SS, 1939-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971).

24 Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 102.

25 Stein, The Waffen SS, p. 205; Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 103. Both of these sources cite no explicit evidence of Axmann's alleged role.

26 Berger to Brandt (Pers. Stab Reichsfuehrer-SS), July 3, 1943; Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Washington: The National Archives), Microcopy T-175, roll 108, frames 2631226-7 (hereafter cited as T-175/108/2631226-7).

27 Berger, "Aktenvermerk: Besprechung mit Möckel," February 9, 1943; T-175/108/2631262.

28 Himmler to Axmann, February 13, 1943; T-175/108/2631254.

29 Himmler to Berger, February 16, 1943; T-175/108/2631245.

30 Berger to Himmler, "Aufstellung der Division 'Hitler-Jugend'", February 18, 1943; T-175/108/2631249-51.

31 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," pp. 612-614.

32 Berger, "Besprechung am 8. III. 1943"; T-175/108/2631235-8.

33 Jüttner, SS-Führungshauptamt to SS-Hauptamt, "Aufstellung der Division 'Hitler-Jugend'," March 10, 1943; T-175/108/2631241.

34 Berger to Jüttner, "Aufstellung der Division 'Hitler-Jugend'," March 20, 1943; T-175/108/2631229.

35 Himmler to Generalmajor Schmundt, March 22, 1943; T-175/108/2631233.

36 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," p. 360.

37 The Goebbels' Diaries, trans. and ed. by Louis P. Lochner (New York: Doubleday, 1948), p. 337.

38 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," p. 624.

39 Ibid., p. 361.

40 Ibid., pp. 624-628; pp. 352-354.

41 Ibid., p. 624.

42 Berger to Himmler, May 27, 1943; T-175/108/2631243-4.

43 Cited in Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," pp. 640-1.

44 Ibid., pp. 634-637.

45 Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere (Munich: Schild-Verlag, 1957), p. 206.

46 Witt: "Meldung von Männern, die sich nicht freiwillig zur 'Hitlerjugend' Division meldeten," November 19, 1943; T-175/108/3798021.

47 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," p. 637.

48 Ibid., pp. 575-587.

49 Cited in Rempel, "The Misguided Generation,", p. 632.

50 SS-Führungshauptamt: "Aufstellung der SS-Pz.-Gr. Div. 'Hitlerjugend'," June 24, 1943; T-175/108/2831222-3. See also Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 206; Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 111.

51 Fritz Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. C-024 (Washington: The National Archives), pp. 1-7. The close links which were expected to be formed between the two divisions is shown by the Hitler Youth Division's insignia: a Hitler Youth rune, superimposed on top of the skeleton key insignia of the Leibstandarte. See Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 132.

52 James Lucas and Matthew Cooper, Hitler's Elite: Leibstandarte SS, 1933-1945 (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975), pp. 154-155.

53 B.J.S. MacDonald, The Trial of Kurt Meyer (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1954), pp. 71-77.

54 Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 109.

55 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 205. See also K. G. Klietmann Die Waffen-SS: Eine Dokumentation (Osnabrück: Verlag "der Freiwillige", 1965), p. 181.

56 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," pp. 645-646.

57 Ibid., p. 637; Charles P. Stacey, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, vol. 3: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945 (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), p. 129. This small age difference does not appear to have caused much concern among the senior officers of the division. See Fritz Schroeder to Schamilcher, Jan. 28, 1944; Miscellaneous SS Records: Einwandererzentralstelle, Waffen-SS, and SS-Oberabschnitte (Washington: The National Archives), Microcopy T-354, roll 154, frame 3798192 (hereafter cited as T-354/154/3798192).

58 Hitlers Lagebesprechungen: Die Protokollfragmente seiner militärischen Konferenzen, 1942-1945, ed. Helmut Heiber, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962), p. 335.

59 Ibid., p. 334.

60 Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3: 124-5.

61 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 205-6.

62 Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegsführung, 1939-1945, ed. Walter Hubatsch, (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1962), p. 234.

63 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 206.

64 Unit diary of SS Panzer Engineer Battalion 12, January-April, 1944; T-354/155/3798843ff; Schroeder to Bernhard, March 7, 1944; T-354/154/3798178; Wünsche; "Sonderbefehl," February 25, 1944; T-354/155/3798721. See also Koch, The Hitler Youth, p. 245.

65 Unit diary of SS Panzer Engineer Battalion 12, January-April, 1944; T-354/155/3798843ff.

66 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 207.

67 SS-Führungshauptamt: "Umgliederung der SS-Pz.-Gr. Div. 'H.J.'," October 30, 1943; T-175/108/2631204-5.

68 Bender and Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, 3:109.

69 Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, "Reflections on the Invasion," Military Review 51 (February 1961): p. 9. See also Witt: "Ausbildungsbefehl," November 17, 1943; T-354/156/3800269-70; Mohnke: "Ausbildungsbefehl," March 25, 1944; T-354/154/3797316-72; Weekly Training Plan of "Kraftfahrkompanie", December 12, 1943 - January 2, 1944; T-354/154/3797392-4.

70 Witt: "Die Weltanschauliche Schulung in der SS Panzerdivision 'Hitlerjugend'," November 22, 1943; T-175/156/3800397-8.

71 Witt: "Dienstanweisung für die Mitarbeiter der Abteilung VI," December 16, 1943; T-354/155/3799083-4.

72 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," p. 644. The weekly ration consisted of: 3.5 liters milk, 1,750 grams bread, 200 grams meat, 140 grams lard, 120 grams sugar, 245 grams nutrients.

73 Koch, The Hitler Youth, p. 246. See also the order forbidding smoking in the SS Panzer Engineer Battalion 12; T-354/154/3798611.

74 SS Uschaf. Walles: "Bericht," December 16, 1943; T-354/154/3797402; Schroeder to Pz Art. Regt. 12, January 15, 1944; T-354/154/3798193; Witt: "Sonderbefehl," April 28, 1944; T-354/154/3797996.

75 T-354/154/3797803.

76 "Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./ SS Pz. Gr. Regt. 25," May 8, 1944; T-354/156/3799958.

77 Witt: "Untergebenen Misshandlung," February 6, 1944; T-354/153/3797063. See also Witt: "Sonderbefehl," February 6, 1944; T-354/153/3797080.

78 Witt: "Sonderbefehl," April 4, 1944; T-354/154/3797992-3.

79 Felix Steiner, Die Armee der Geächteten (Göttingen: Plesse Verlag, 1963), p. 181.

80 See especially the rosters of the 3rd and 10th Companies, 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment, July 3, 1944; T-354/154/3798022-28.

81 MacDonald, The Trial of Kurt Meyer, p. 106-107.

82 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 206.

83 Witt: "Sonderbefehl," March 16, 1944: T-354/154/3797994.

84 Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtsführungstab), 1940-1945, 5 vols., eds. Percey Ernst Schramm et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1961-1963), 4: 115.

85 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 5.

86 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 206.

87 Bender & Taylor, History of the Waffen-SS, p. 125. See also Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 129.

88 Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 274n.1.

89 Peter Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, 1944-1945 (Vienna, Munich, Zurich: Verlag Fritz Molden, 1969), p. 279.

CHAPTER II

THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN

In late 1943, the growing likelihood of an allied invasion of Europe prompted Hitler to strengthen German defences in the West. On November 3, he issued Directive No. 51, which announced that the West would no longer be weakened in favor of other theaters of war. Instead, construction of the Atlantic Wall was to be speeded up, while additional men and equipment were to be transferred to France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.[1] As a result of this directive, the number of German divisions in the West rose from only 19 in November 1943, to 58 by June 1944. More significantly, among these 58 divisions were nine panzer divisions -- including the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" -- which were to provide the armoured backbone for German defensive operations.[2]

How these panzer divisions were actually to be employed in the event of an allied invasion was the subject of much controversy among German military commanders. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the Commander-in-Chief West, believed that the divisions should be deployed as centrally-located armoured reserves in order to deliver a concentrated counter-attack against the enemy after he had landed. This plan was opposed by the prestigious commander of Army Group B, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who argued that allied air superiority would severely restrict the movement of such central reserves, making it impossible for them to manoeuvre or strike quickly. Rommel proposed instead that the armoured reserves be placed closely behind coastal defences in order to intervene immediately in the battle. As far as Rommel was concerned,

the allies could be halted only by defeating them during the first vital hours of an invasion.[3]

Ironically, neither view prevailed in this dispute. An illogical compromise was instead imposed upon both sides by Hitler's decision to divide the armoured force in two. Field Marshal Rommel was given direct command over the 2nd, 21st, and 116th Panzer Divisions to station near the coast as a tactical reserve. The remaining armoured divisions in the north, the 1st SS Panzer, 12th SS Panzer, and Panzer Lehr Divisions, were organized into a centrally-located strategic reserve under the direct command of the OKW.[4] Neither of the rival strategies was therefore actually given enough forces to ensure its complete success.

Disagreement had also emerged within German command circles as to where the expected Anglo-American invasion would occur. Von Rundstedt was convinced that the landings would take place on the Pas de Calais. This view was only partially shared by Rommel and Hitler, who also recognized the possible threat of landings in Normandy or Brittany. The result was that, despite von Rundstedt's objections, Rommel had taken the precaution of stationing the 21st Panzer Division south of Caen, while Hitler had positioned the 12th SS Panzer Division only fifty miles from the Normandy coast.[5] In May 1944, Rommel endeavoured to gain von Rundstedt's support to move the 12th SS Panzer Division even closer to the coast, claiming that there was growing evidence which pointed to Normandy as a potential landing site. When von Rundstedt rejected this proposal, Rommel felt that he should personally inform Hitler of his concern about Normandy. On June 5, with weather reports seeming to rule out the immediate possibility of an invasion, he departed by car for Germany, intending to meet with Hitler at Berchtesgaden and to ask in particular that the 12th SS Panzer Division be moved to the St. Lo-

Carentan area.[6] Needless to say, his plans were overtaken by events in Normandy itself.

In the early morning hours of June 6, the first reports of allied airborne landings began to filter in from German coastal divisions. The 12th SS Panzer Division received news of these landings at 3:00 a.m., when the 711th Infantry Division, stationed east of the Orne estuary, reported enemy airborne troops behind its left wing. Although the 12th SS had not yet received any instructions, SS Brigadier Witt placed the entire division on full alert by 3:30 a.m.[7] Shortly thereafter, orders were received from the Commander-in-Chief West, instructing the division to move north and carry out a "reconnaissance in force" towards the coast.[8]

At this point, the movement of the 12th SS Panzer Division was hampered by confusion within the upper echelons of the German high command. The Commander-in-Chief West was not authorized to commit any of the divisions of the armoured reserve without first obtaining the approval of Hitler and the OKW. When von Rundstedt asked for the release of the 12th SS Panzer Division at 5:00 a.m. and informed the OKW that it had already been ordered north, he was told by General Alfred Jodl of the OKW that the division was to be halted immediately. Speaking for Hitler, who was asleep at the time, Jodl announced that he was still not convinced that the invasion had begun and did not wish to risk committing the OKW armoured reserve against what might prove to be only a diversionary attack. Jodl therefore instructed von Rundstedt to resolve the existing situation with regular infantry units only. This would give the OKW sufficient time to obtain a clearer picture of actual allied intentions in Normandy.[9]

Von Rundstedt apparently disregarded Jodl's directive, for at

7:00 a.m., the 12th SS Panzer Division received orders that it was to be placed under Army Group B and subordinated to the LXXXI. Infantry Corps at Rouen. By 10:00 a.m., SS Colonel Kurt Meyer's reinforced 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the Mark IV battalion of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment were already moving north-east toward the coast. Close behind them came SS Lt. Colonel Wilhelm Mohnke's reinforced 26th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment, accompanied by the division's Panther tank battalion.[10]

Meyer had reached the town of Lisieux by the early afternoon when he received orders to change his route of march. At 2:30 p.m., Hitler and the OKW had finally reached the decision to release the Panzer Lehr and 12th SS Panzer Divisions, and to place both under the command of the I. SS Panzer Corps. As a result, the Hitler Youth Division was now ordered to change its course and proceed to the Carpiquet - Tilly-sur-Seulles area immediately west of Caen.[11]

By this time, the overcast skies which had prevented enemy air activity during the earlier part of the day had cleared, and the movement of the 12th SS Panzer Division was severely hampered by allied fighter bombers. Moving along the Lisieux - St. Pierre-sur-Dives - St. Sylvain - Caen road, the division was repeatedly strafed from the air, and its pace of travel slowed to a bare four miles-per-hour.[12] Because of this, the division now could not be expected to reach the Caen area until the early evening. Moreover, since additional time was required to assemble for an attack, it had also become evident that it could not be employed against the allied bridgehead on June 6.

The way in which the 12th SS Panzer Division had spent most of June 6 marching behind the front lines has led to much criticism of the OKW for its failure to release the division earlier in the day. Never-

theless, one must bear in mind the fact that it would have been unwise for the OKW to have released its only available armoured reserve before it was even certain that the allied landings were not a diversionary tactic. In addition, it is questionable whether the 12th SS Panzer Division would have been able to intervene effectively against the allied bridgehead on June 6, even if it had been released much sooner. The fifty miles which the division had to travel, coupled with the ability of allied fighter bombers to wreak havoc on German marching columns, would have undoubtedly prevented it from reaching the coast before evening.[13] Indeed, Rommel's concern about placing armoured divisions near to the coast would be more than justified by subsequent events in Normandy.

As it was, the first elements of Meyer's battle-group did not reach the southern outskirts of Caen until 11:00 p.m. Here, Meyer met with Generals Feuchtinger and Richter, the commanders of the 21st Panzer and 716th Infantry Divisions respectively.[14] He learned from them that the 716th Division had been practically annihilated during the day's fighting, while the 21st Panzer Division, the only German armoured division to see action on June 6, was engaged against strong enemy forces to the north and east of Caen. Meyer was apparently unperturbed by their reports, for he is said to have remarked confidently about the enemy: "Little Fish! We'll throw them back into the sea in the morning!"[15]

Orders to this effect were drawn up by the I. SS Panzer Corps during the night, and issued by Witt to the 12th SS Panzer Division early on June 7. Items 3 and 6 of the orders stated optimistically:

> 3. <u>The Division</u>, in conjunction with the 21st Panzer Division will attack the enemy and throw him back into the sea. . . .

4. Objective: The beach. . . .[16]

The attack was to begin at noon on June 7. Yet because of the division's slow rate of travel on the previous day, the 26th Regiment and the Panther battalion could not be expected to participate in the assault. Plans were therefore drawn up to include Meyer's battle-group only. Along with units of the 21st Panzer Division, this represented a force of approximately 160 tanks and five battalions of infantry with which to strike a blow against the advancing allied forces.[17]

During the night of June 6/7, the three battalions of the 25th Regiment took up positions to the north and east of Caen: the III. Battalion on the left, near the Caen-Bayeux highway; the II. Battalion in the middle, near the village of St. Contest; and the I. Battalion on the right, near Epron, three miles north of Caen. The battalion of Mark IV tanks did not arrive at their assembly points until 10:00 a.m. They had been attacked repeatedly by fighter bombers while moving during daylight hours, and had also been plagued by fuel shortages and mechanical breakdowns. As a result, only fifty vehicles were ready for action when they finally took up supporting positions on both flanks of the 25th Regiment.[18]

While Meyer's battle-group was readying itself for the planned counter-attack, the allies had been far from idle. During the morning of June 7, the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade had already begun advancing south-west along the road from les Buissons toward the Carpiquet airfield, two miles west of Caen. Carpiquet had been the objective of the brigade on June 6, but it had been forced to halt for the night five miles short of the airfield. It had resumed its advance toward Carpiquet on June 7, unaware of the fact that its line of march would now take it directly across the front of Meyer's assembled battle-group.[19]

Meyer had established a tactical command post in one of the towers of the medieval Ardenne Abbey, north-west of Caen. From here he spotted the advance guard of the 9th Canadian Brigade moving along his front shortly before noon. Despite orders to carry out a joint counter-attack with the 21st Panzer Division, Meyer decided to attack the advancing Canadians alone, while their flank was so dangerously exposed. He reasoned that such an opportunity might never again present itself, and even seriously believed that his battle-group might succeed in driving all the way to the sea if supported on its right flank by the 21st Panzer Division.[20]

As the lead Canadian tanks began to cross the Caen-Bayeux highway, Meyer gave the orders to attack. The III. Battalion went forward first, followed in turn by the II. and I. Battalions, thereby pivoting the whole line on the battle-group's right wing. The III. Battalion's attack took the Canadians by surprise and it was able to overrun two companies of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders in the village of Authie. By the mid-afternoon, the battalion had succeeded in pushing the Canadians back two miles and was able to occupy the village of Buron. The other two battalions also succeeded in forcing the Canadians to pull back, with the II. Battalion reaching the village of Galmanche, and the I. Battalion taking possession of Cambes.[21]

The German attack began to falter at this point because of the sudden onset of allied artillery fire, coming not only from field guns, but also from the fifteen- and sixteen-inch guns aboard battleships anchored off the Normandy coast.[22] Their effects were later described by a private in the 12th SS Artillery Regiment:

> Because of this concentrated fire, such as I had never seen before on any European battlefield,

> both officers and men became demoralized and were forced to dig in. For perhaps an hour I lay in a giant shell crater together with some Canadian prisoners, and saw that they were just as demoralized by their own fire as we were, although these prisoners belonged to an excellently trained unit.[23]

The devastating effect of this fire, coupled with stiffening Canadian resistance, eventually brought the battle-group to a halt. In the early evening, Meyer finally gave the order to break off the attack entirely when it was discovered that both of his flanks were dangerously exposed. In the east, an independent attack by the 21st Panzer Division had made little progress during the day, leaving Meyer's right flank undefended. This exposed flank was already being probed by British armoured units by the late afternoon.[24] At the same time, Meyer spotted a strong enemy armoured force moving toward Bretteville l'Orguelleuse on his open western flank. Only several weak reconniassance units had been positioned on the left in anticipation of the delayed arrival of Mohnke's battle-group. As a result, Meyer had little choice but to halt his attack and await the arrival of additional forces.[25]

Meyer's battle-group had fought remarkably well during its baptism of fire on June 7. The young SS soldiers had succeeded in hurling back an enemy force at least as large as their own, despite the overwhelming allied superiority in terms of both air and artillery support. Moreover, as the Canadian official history points out: "The German blow had been well coordinated. . . . tanks, infantry and artillery had all played their parts effectively in close cooperation with one another."[26] The 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade reported an estimated 21 tanks destroyed and seven more damaged. Meyer gives figures (perhaps questionable) of only two German tanks destroyed and five more temporarily put out of action.[27]

Yet one should perhaps ask whether Meyer's attack on June 7 had been justified as far as strategic considerations were concerned. To be sure, it would help to prevent the city of Caen from falling into allied hands for at least one full month. Moreover, the Canadians in particular would not reach their D-Day objective of Carpiquet until the beginning of July. Yet it should also be realized that Meyer's unauthorized attack had ultimately done very little to help drive the allied bridgehead "back into the sea". His limited force could only "deflect" the advancing Canadians and, in the end, represented nothing more than a piece-meal commitment of valuable German armour. Indeed, one could even ask whether Meyer himself had actually considered the strategic implications of his move, or whether his attack had simply been sparked by his own reckless desire to engage the enemy.

On the night of June 7/8, Mohnke's battle-group finally took up its position on Meyer's left flank. The first elements of the Panzer Lehr Division also began to arrive at daybreak, assembling west of Mohnke in the Tilly-sur-Seulles region.[28] With this growing concentration of armoured forces, Field Marshal Rommel believed that it was now possible to carry out a powerful blow against the enemy and prevent a further strengthening of his bridgehead. Rommel accordingly ordered the I. SS Panzer Corps to strike between Caen and Bayeux on June 8, using the 21st Panzer, 12th SS Panzer, and Panzer Lehr Divisions.[29]

However, Rommel failed to realize that all three of these divisions were not yet in a position to carry out a coordinated counter-attack. The 21st Panzer Division had been in action since June 6, and was still heavily engaged against the British to the north of Caen. The Panzer Lehr Division had still not finished assembling in its new positions, and had suffered considerable losses during its long and costly journey to

the Normandy front. Even the 12th SS Panzer Division was not prepared for a full-scale attack since Mohnke's battle-group was low on fuel, and Meyer's battle-group was still recovering from the previous day's fighting.[30]

The I. SS Panzer Corps could therefore do little more than order a limited counter-attack by only the 12th SS Panzer Division on June 8. It began in the late morning when Mohnke launched two battalions of his 26th Regiment against units of the Canadian 7th Infantry Brigade in the Norrey-en-Bessin and Putot-en-Bessin area. The attack against Norrey ground to a halt before mid-day, but the attack against Putot met with slightly more success. Three companies of the Royal Winnipeg Rifle Regiment were surrounded and wiped out near the village, and Putot itself was occupied by the late afternoon. Mohnke was able to hold the village until the early evening, when a strong counter-attack by the Canadian Scottish Regiment finally forced him to withdraw.[31]

Just as Mohnke was pulling out of Putot, Kurt Meyer was launching a separate attack against the Canadians in Bretteville l'Orguelleuse. Meyer had conferred earlier with the commander of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, SS Major Max Wünsche, and both officers had decided to organize an attack north-west along the Caen-Bayeux highway, using one company of Panther tanks, the reconnaissance company of the 25th Regiment, and the I. Battalion of the 26th Regiment. After securing the agreement of SS Brigadier Witt, the attack was launched during the evening under the cover of darkness. Characteristically, Meyer himself led the company of tanks, with men of the reconnaissance company mounted on top of them, as they made a swift and daring charge into Bretteville. The tanks succeeded in overrunning the outer Canadian defences and penetrated as far as the center of the village. Yet at this point, Meyer's tanks

found themselves deprived of necessary infantry support since the I./26 was unable to push its way through to Bretteville from the south. Meyer continued a frenzied and costly battle in the streets of the village until the early hours of the morning, but was eventually forced to withdraw after losing five Panthers.[32]

The inconclusive attacks carried out by the 12th SS Panzer Division on June 8 had revealed several shortcomings as far as planning and leadership were concerned. The operations against Putot and Bretteville had been apparently uncoordinated and almost completely independent of each other. Meyer and Mohnke had not endeavoured to carry out a joint assault against the Canadians, but instead had committed their respective forces in separate attacks which had ultimately accomplished very little. Moreover, SS Brigadier Witt had seemingly been content to allow his regimental commanders to plan their own attacks without endeavouring to ensure any form of divisional control.

The operations on June 8 had also revealed a certain lack of tactical skill on the German side. A Canadian regimental commander who participated in the fighting at Bretteville would later point out that although his flanks had been exposed, ". . . the enemy flung himself straight against the strongest points and utterly failed to exploit the undoubted weakness of his opponent's position."[33] Meyer had displayed the characteristic courage and daring of a Waffen-SS officer by leading his men into battle; however, whether he had displayed the requisite tactical skill of a military officer would appear questionable in this instance.

The failure of I. SS Panzer Corps to deliver a more substantial counter-attack finally prompted Rommel and von Rundstedt to give General

Geyr von Schweppenburg's Panzer Group West control of all German divisions between the Vire and Orne Rivers on June 9. Both Rommel and von Rundstedt had little confidence in the abilities of SS General Sepp Dietrich, and believed that Geyr might achieve success where I. SS Panzer Corps had failed. Geyr immediately set out to coordinate a new armoured counter-thrust to be carried out on the evening of June 10/11. All units under Panzer Group West's command were to remain on the defensive until plans for the operation had been completed.[35]

However, Geyr's counter-offensive was frustrated even before it began, for the allies launched their own attack on the morning of June 10. The allies were now determined to capture the city of Caen, and thereby to threaten the entire right flank of the German front in Normandy. The strong resistance which the British and Canadians had encountered in their attempts to advance directly on the city had caused the commander of 21st Army Group, General Sir Bernard Montgomery, to propose a new plan of attack. A British armoured drive was to be launched approximately nine miles west of Caen, crossing the Odon River and swinging east to occupy the high ground south of the city.[35]

Early on the morning of June 10, the British struck at the center of the Panzer Lehr Division's sector, which soon became the scene of bitter fighting. The 12th SS Panzer Division did not become heavily embroiled in the conflict until June 11, when the Canadians launched a limited attack against its front to support the main British offensive. The Canadians hoped to push south-west from Norrey to capture the village of le Mesnil Patry, while at the same time attempting to drive south along the Mue River valley to occupy the village of Rots.

The attack towards le Mesnil Patry on the morning of June 11, ended in a complete disaster for the Canadians. As their lead tanks

with infantry mounted on them entered the grain fields to the north of the village, they were hit by well-aimed mortar, machine-gun, and anti-tank gun fire from the I./26 in the east, and the III./26 in the west. They were finally forced to withdraw after losing 37 tanks and suffering 79 casualties.[36]

By comparison, the attack along the Mue valley met with slightly more success. Despite stiff opposition from the I./26, the crack 46th Commando, Royal Marines, finally entered the village of Rots by the early evening. The young SS soldiers in the village continued to offer resistance throughout the night, and it was not until the morning of June 12 that the Commandos could finally report the village cleared.[37] A Canadian historian visited Rots later that day and described the scene of this bitter fighting:

> They fought like lions on both sides, so that the dead lay corpse by corpse. We searched every house, every courtyard to avoid ambush. And here is the confirmation of how ferocious last night's battle must have been. The Commandos lie dead in rows beside the dead SS. Grenades are scattered all over the road and in the porches of houses. Here we see a Commando and an SS man literally dead in each other's arms, having slaughtered each other. There, a German and a Canadian tank have engaged each other to destruction and are still smouldering, and from each blackened turret hangs the charred corpse of a machine gunner. . . . And then, near the church, as the advance guard of C Company and the carriers turn the corner, there are three Germans. Only three. But one of them instantly draws his pistol, and hits one of our men. A Bren gunner kills two of the three SS men, but the survivor does not surrender; he dodges us, and gets away. Now we understand with what kind of fanatic we have to deal.[38]

The Canadians halted their attacks on June 12, and three days later the British were also forced to call off their offensive after failing even to gain a crossing over the Odon River. Nevertheless, the allied attacks against the Panzer Lehr and 12th SS Panzer Division had

resulted in the cancellation of the planned armoured counter-offensive by General Geyr's Panzer Group West. Indeed, on the evening of June 10, all of Geyr's plans were permanently shelved when his poorly camouflaged headquarters was attacked and destroyed by allied fighter bombers.[39]

It was now apparent to German commanders in Normandy that their valuable panzer divisions could not be used for a large-scale counter-attack as long as they were expected to plug the gaps in the German line of defence. On June 11, Field Marshal Rommel pointed out to the OKW that it would have to "replace the armoured formations now in the line as soon as possible by infantry so that the armour can be used to form mobile reserves behind the front."[40] However, the urgency of the situation in Normandy was not apparent to Hitler. All that he was willing to spare for the West were infantry divisions stationed in Norway, Denmark and the Reich, which would require weeks to reach France.[41] The German armoured divisions were therefore forced to remain in the line, fulfilling a static, defensive function for which they had never been intended.

Thus, on June 11, I. SS Panzer Corps was given official orders to go over to the defence, and the 12th SS Panzer Division accordingly dug itself in on a line from Cristot in the east, to Cambes north of Caen.[42] At the same time, the Canadians opposite the 12th SS were also ordered by General Montgomery to hold their present positions. Montgomery had realized that he did not have enough troops to act offensively on all fronts of the British Second Army. He had therefore decided "to be defensive on the Caen Sector. . . but aggressively so."[43] Consequently, the following two weeks witnessed no major offensives on the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division. However, harassment from allied fighter bombers and artillery, coupled with repeated probing attacks, continued

to take a heavy toll of the division's men and equipment.

For both the young SS soldiers and the veteran officers of the division, it was the allied fighter bombers which were the most frustrating to endure. The division suffered daily casualties from air attacks, against which the men were helpless to fight back. Fighter bombers were constantly in the air during the daylight hours, necessitating as little movement as possible in German defensive positions. Communications between units was made difficult, and supply columns could travel only under the cover of darkness because of this allied mastery of the skies.[44] An SS private in the division later described how: "In daylight I [saw] Allied fighter-bombers dive on any vehicle which moved, including even dispatch riders, and literally hunt them down the road. Reliefs took place by night, and even the bringing up of rations involved a trip of life or death."[45]

More deadly and destructive than allied fighter bombers was the fire of allied artillery. Directed from spotter planes which droned with impunity over the German lines, it would pour unexpected fire into the positions of the 12th SS Panzer Division throughout the day.[46] It was one such barrage on June 14, by the lethal guns aboard allied battleships, which killed Fritz Witt at his headquarters twenty miles south-west of Caen. Witt was immediately replaced as commander of the division by Kurt Meyer.[47]

Meyer's first weeks as commander of the 12th SS Panzer Division were occupied primarily with the repeated patrols and probing attacks by the British and Canadians. While the division had little difficulty in holding a line running roughly east from its defensive positions north of Caen to the town of Tilly-sur-Seulles, its continued daily losses were gradually sapping its strength. For example, the records

of the I./25 show an average daily loss of at least two men killed and twelve men wounded or missing for the period between June 11 and June 20.[48] The Chief of Staff of I. SS Panzer Corps, SS Senior Colonel Fritz Kraemer, has estimated that the 12th SS as a whole was left with only 2,000 front-line soldiers by June 20.[49] The result was that the Hitler Youth Division could no longer be considered fit for large-scale offensive operations by the middle of June.[50] Inadequate reinforcements resulted in support and communications personnel even being used to man the division's defensive positions.[51] It was clear that the war along the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division had become a war of attrition -- a war which the allies were sure to win, considering their uninterrupted reinforcements and overwhelming material superiority.

By June 22, there was growing evidence that the allies were intending to launch a new major offensive against the sector of the Hitler Youth Division. Such information was gathered both from forward observation posts and, more importantly, from radio messages intercepted by the 12th SS Panzer Division's special radio reconnaissance unit.[52] Yet despite the warnings of radio reconnaissance, I. SS Panzer Corps ordered that the 12th SS Panzer Regiment and the 101st SS Heavy Tank Battalion (which had been subordinated to the division), be sent westward on June 25 to help the Panzer Lehr Division deal with a threatening bulge in its lines. The result was that the 12th SS was left with no tanks along its entire front on June 26 -- the day the British chose to launch their massive offensive, Operation "Epsom".[53]

The plan of Operation "Epsom" called for the British 15th and 43rd Infantry Divisions, along with the 11th Armoured Division, to break through the line of the 12th SS Panzer Division, cross the Odon and Orne Rivers, and establish themselves on the high ground south of Caen. It

was hoped that this would provide the decisive blow which would lead to the final capture of Caen.[54]

Early on June 26, Kurt Meyer was directing the counter-attack by the 12th SS Panzer Regiment in the west, when the British struck the center of his own front. Following behind a tremendous artillery barrage, British tanks and infantry overran the defensive positions along the center of the Hitler Youth Division's front, and by mid-morning had pushed one mile to the south. Meyer immediately ordered his tanks to break off their attack in the west and to strike against the flank of the advancing enemy. This armoured counter-attack, coupled with well-aimed Nebelwerfer[55] fire, and the almost suicidal resistance of scattered pockets of German infantry, finally succeeded in halting the British attack by the early evening.[56]

Yet the 12th SS Panzer Division had been able to stop the British advance only by throwing in every available man. As the diary of Army Group B pointed out, "a complete defensive success" had been achieved only by I. SS Panzer Corps "employing its last reserves" and "with all the forces of 12th SS Panzer Division and Panzer Lehr Division taxed to the utmost."[57] Accounts of the day's fighting are filled with stories of the suicidal resistance offered by the young soldiers of the Hitler Youth Division. The most dramatic example of this was provided by the division's engineer battalion, which had been completely overrun near Cheux. A handful of survivors and the battalion commander had been able to hold out in a bunker for more than twelve hours. During this time, the British had tried repeatedly to get them out by hurling in grenades, and even by firing at the bunker's entrance with a tank. One young soldier had lost his nerve and given himself up, only to return a short time later to apologize to the commander and to rejoin the group. All

in the bunker were "resolved for battle" and were ready to "resist to the last man", as a battalion report recorded. Yet the British had not renewed their attacks, and at midnight, the survivors were able to escape the bunker and reach their own lines the next morning.[58]

By the evening of June 26, the center of the 12th SS Panzer Division's front had been pushed back at least three miles. Moreover, because of the division's heavy losses, only a thin screen of infantry was available to hold the line in some places. Meyer reported to I. SS Panzer Corps that without reinforcements an enemy breakthrough was inevitable. Corps replied that the eagerly-awaited II. SS Panzer Corps was due to reach the Normandy front within the next day, and that Meyer would have to hold out until then.[59]

The 12th SS was therefore forced to endure another day of frenzied and bitter fighting when the British resumed their attack towards the Odon River on the morning of June 27. Surprisingly, small pockets of German tanks and infantry were still able to delay the British advance throughout the morning. Their resolve was undoubtedly strengthened by Kurt Meyer, who recklessly drove from sector to sector in his motorcycle or volkswagen. But ultimately they could not prevent the British from establishing a bridgehead over the Odon at Tourmauville by the late afternoon.[60] Here the British encountered what at first appeared to be wildly-aimed sniper fire coming from all directions. However, this actually proved to be "not snipers at all, not a thin screen out in front of the main German battle line; those scattered shots with the occasional burst of machine-gun fire <u>was</u> the main German position -- all that was left of the 12th SS Panzer Division on that front, a handful of determined teenagers, toughly arrogant at the havoc they were causing."[61] Meyer immediately dispatched a battered company of Panther tanks and the

remnants of the reconnaissance battalion to Hill 112, in the hope of preventing a British breakthrough to the Orne River. Yet, as luck would have it, the British chose not to pursue their attack any further that evening.

The following day would undoubtedly have witnessed disaster along the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division had it not been for the timely arrival during the night of elements of the 1st SS Panzer Division from the east, and of II. SS Panzer Corps from the south-west. These units assumed responsibility for the hard-pressed sector between Evrecy, Hill 112 and Verson, while the remnants of the Hitler Youth Division were given the much reduced sector from Verson, through Carpiquet to Cambes, north of Caen.[62]

Because the transfer of these sectors could only be carried out gradually, many units of the 12th SS Panzer Division still found themselves heavily engaged throughout June 28 in their old positions. This was particularly the case around Hill 112, which was the target of repeated British attacks on June 28. So fierce was the fighting around the hill that the small Odon River had actually become damned by knots of soldiers' bodies by the end of the day.[63] A member of a Luftwaffe flak unit which was ordered on June 28 to relieve a battalion of the 12th SS on Hill 112, later described how they had found only a company of exhausted young boys. The fanatical resistance which had been offered by these SS soldiers was revealed by their story of "an 18-year old boy [who] had destroyed five enemy tanks at close quarters, using Panzerfaust or 'stovepipe' equipment. For the last one, indeed, he had only used a pistol. He climbed up on it from the back, knocked with his pistol on the turret hatch and ordered the crew to get out."[64]

Such determined resistance was able to prevent the British from

occupying Hill 112 on June 28. Yet German attempts to destroy the Odon bridgehead on June 29 and June 30 were a complete failure. The attacks carried out by the II. SS Panzer Corps on these days were soon brought to a halt by the continuous fire of allied fighter bombers and naval artillery. On July 1, II. SS Panzer Corps was finally ordered to switch over to the defence, revealing how hopeless the prospect of launching a major armoured counter-offensive in Normandy had actually become for the Germans.[65]

The performance of the 12th SS Panzer Division during the "Epsom" offensive had been remarkable. Roughly 2,000 young SS soldiers had absorbed the brunt of an attack by the almost 60,000 men, 600 tanks, and 700 guns of the British VIII Corps.[66] Although vastly outnumbered, they had prevented an allied breakthrough to the Orne River, and again had frustrated allied hopes of capturing the city of Caen. Of course, the division had paid a terrible price for its defensive success. By June 30, the 26th Regiment had been reduced to the strength of a weak battalion; the 12th SS Panzer Regiment could only muster several battered companies of tanks; the division's engineer battalion had been almost totally destroyed; the division's reconnaissance battalion consisted only of one mixed company; and the 12th SS Artillery Regiment had lost an entire battalion of guns during the battle. Although the 25th Regiment had seen relatively little fighting in its positions to the north and west of Caen, the strength of the 12th SS Panzer Division as a whole had been reduced to what amounted to little more than a weak battle-group.[67] Yet, owing to the shortage of reinforcements, it was this weak battle-group which was still expected to hold the line to the north and west of Caen.

At this point, it should be mentioned that while the 12th SS Panzer Division had acquired a reputation for fierce and determined

fighting during the first weeks of June, it had also become known for its brutality. Between June 7 and June 17, 134 unarmed Canadian prisoners of war, many of them wounded, were shot by members of the division. The worst instances of this were at Authie and Buron on June 7, when 23 Canadians were murdered, and at Putot on June 8, when 45 prisoners were shot. News of these atrocities fired up the indignation and outrage of the Canadians, who referred to the 12th SS as the "Murder Division". German soldiers wearing the characteristic camouflage smock of the Waffen-SS were often thereafter given no quarter if captured by the Canadians.[68]

It would be difficult to single out any one specific factor which could explain these brutal excesses of the 12th SS Panzer Division. The reckless and aggressive leadership of young SS officers, such as Kurt Meyer, undoubtedly contributed to the blurring of "clear distinctions between murder and 'legal' killing in combat conditions."[69] The fact that many of these officers had fought in the Soviet Union, where no quarter was often given by both sides, could have also encouraged a disregard for the accepted rules of warfare. One must also bear in mind the impressionable young age of most of the division's soldiers; the long years during which they had been subjected to propaganda calling for the merciless destruction of the "enemy"; the growing desperation of the German war effort; and finally the widespread rumours that the British and Canadians themselves took no prisoners.[70] All of these factors most certainly contributed to the atrocities committed by the 12th SS Panzer Division.

At the end of the Second World War, Kurt Meyer would be brought before a Canadian military tribunal and sentenced to death for his alleged role in the murder of Canadian prisoners by his men. The

prosecution at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg would claim that the shooting of prisoners by the 12th SS Panzer Division was motivated by the same inhuman spirit which had led to the extermination of the Jews by other elements of the SS.[71] Subsequently, some British and Canadian historians would refer to the "beardless killers" and "young beasts" of the Hitler Youth Division, who were said to have "represented the Third Reich at its barbarous worst."[72]

Yet, while one cannot condone the atrocities committed by the 12th SS Panzer Division, one can question whether the division's actions were really much more uncivilized or savage than those committed by the allies themselves. Numerous Canadians would later confess that they too had often not taken prisoners during the first weeks following the Normandy invasion.[73] Kurt Meyer would claim that he had discovered the bodies of dead German soldiers on June 8, who had obviously been shot after being taken prisoner.[74] It is alleged that on some occasions German wounded were tied to the turrets of tanks, or had their throats slit by allied soldiers as they lay helpless on the ground.[75]

Indeed, it would appear that the alleged barbarity of the Hitler Youth Division was much exaggerated by the allies, and perhaps with a specific purpose in mind. As the commander of the British 43rd (Wessex) Division later pointed out: "Those troops who had no previous battle experience were able to attack with high morale if they were given an easy attack at first, or if they faced SS units who were reputed, often unjustly, to shoot prisoners."[76] A Canadian sergeant would later comment: "I cannot now stomach all the atrocities attributed to Kurt Meyer's Division. I must admit that these alleged atrocities served a good purpose at this time, for the news got around that the panzers were taking no prisoners. '<u>Act with that in mind</u>', we were told. . . . It

made the Canadians fighting mad, a very good point in battle, almost a necessity to a green man."[77] The savage portrait of the 12th SS Panzer Division and of SS troops in general which was deliberately fostered by the allied leadership would have its desired effect, for by the time of the "Epsom" offensive, the ferocity displayed by both sides in battle had reached the point where both sides often took no prisoners.

While the "Epsom" offensive was still raging, von Rundstedt and Rommel had travelled to Berchtesgaden on June 29 to meet with Hitler. Both field marshals had pointed out to the Fuehrer that a counter-offensive was no longer feasible, and that the entire German front in Normandy had become untenable. If the Americans should succeed in breaking through the line in the west and drive toward Paris, then both the Seventh Army and Panzer Group West would easily become encircled. Rommel had therefore advocated withdrawing to the Seine River in order to establish a new front.

Despite the arguments of his field marshals, Hitler had again refused to recognize the growing dangers in Normandy. He had insisted that the allies be held within their existing bridgehead and eventually worn down through a war of attrition.[78] Not content with Hitler's response, von Rundstedt and Rommel had returned to France, only to forward a report by General Geyr which supported their call for a German withdrawal. Hitler had responded by replacing von Rundstedt with Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, and replacing General Geyr with General Heinrich Eberbach. Only Rommel was allowed to retain his command.[79] Hitler apparently failed to realize that a change in commanding generals could not alter the fact that the Germans were courting disaster in Normandy.

On July 3, the battered 12th SS Panzer Division manned a front

almost eight miles long to the north and west of Caen.[80] As fate would have it, this line now lay directly in the path of the next projected allied offensive. After their failure to encircle Caen, the allies now proposed to capture the city through a direct frontal assault. To accomplish this, the Canadian 8th Infantry Brigade would first capture Carpiquet and its adjoining airfield on July 4, to be followed four days later by the main assault by three divisions of the British I. Corps against Caen itself.[81]

Through radio reconnaissance, the 12th SS was forewarned of the impending Canadian assault upon Carpiquet. However, no reinforcements were available with which to strengthen the 150 to 200 survivors of the I./26 who defended this sector of the front. All that could be done was to move an 88mm gun into position east of the village of Carpiquet, and to send several additional tanks to join the ten which were dug in around the airfield. All available artillery and Nebelwerfers were also moved into a position from which they could fire on the path of the expected attack. It was hoped that the system of concrete blockhouses which had been constructed around the field would at least partially make up for the allied superiority in terms of both men and equipment.[82]

At 5:00 on the morning of July 4, the assault by the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade against Carpiquet began under the cover of allied artillery fire. The North Shore Regiment and the Regiment de la Chaudière were given the task of capturing Carpiquet itself and the hangars on the northern edge of its airfield, which were both defended by only 50 SS Grenadiers. Although the Canadians were finally able to occupy their objectives by the late morning, they had done so only after suffering heavy losses -- the two Canadian regiments lost over 200 men in the fierce fighting while 30 of the original 50 SS defenders had been

killed.[83]

At the same time, the hangars at the southern edge of the airfield were attacked by the Royal Winnipeg Rifle Regiment. Here the Canadians encountered even stiffer resistance from 150 men of the I./26, and were forced to withdraw to their start line. In the late afternoon they attempted a second assault, but without success. At 9:00 p.m., the Canadians finally called in 44 fighter bombers to attack the German tanks and defensive positions around the airfield, but they were able to produce no significant results. By nightfall, the southern and eastern edges of the airfield were still held by the I./26. The Canadians apparently abandoned all immediate hopes of capturing the airfield, for their attack was not renewed on the following day.[84]

Because of the resistance encountered by the 8th Canadian Brigade at Carpiquet, General Dempsey, the commander of the British Second Army, now considered it necessary to precede the main assault against Caen with a massive air bombardment of the northern outskirts of the city. Surprisingly, Dempsey was aware of the fact that this would have little direct effect upon the German defences, since they were situated in villages three miles to the north of Caen. However, allied bombers could not strike this far north of the city without endangering the British and Canadian troops assembling to attack. Dempsey hoped only that the bombardment would possibly serve to demoralize the Germans and disrupt their supply routes.[85]

On the evening of July 7, 450 heavy allied bombers dropped approximately 2,500 tons of high explosives on the northern outskirts of Caen. The tragic outcome was that approximately 5,000 French civilians were killed in the raid, while both German morale and supplies were relatively unaffected.[86] As SS Major Hubert Meyer, the senior staff

officer of the 12th SS Panzer Division, later reported, the division "suffered negligible casualties. . . . Some tanks and armoured personnel carriers were toppled over or buried under the debris from houses, but after a short while, nearly all of them were ready for action."[87]

Indeed, the air bombardment on the evening of July 7 had served only to alert the Germans to the imminence of a major attack. On the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division, the three battalions of the 25th Regiment now awaited the allied assault from the north. To the east, they were supported by the inexperienced 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, which had only just arrived from the Netherlands. Both divisions were well aware of the fact that Hitler had ordered Caen to be defended to "the last man".[88]

The allied attack finally began at 4:20 on the morning of July 8. Following behind an artillery barrage by over 600 guns, the British 3rd Division and 59th (Staffordshire) Division launched an assault against the German right and center, followed two hours later by the Canadian 3rd Division's attack against the German left. The I./25 and II./25 soon found themselves engulfed in bitter fighting around Epron and St. Contest, and within the first hour, both battalions had lost all of their company commanders. On the left, the III./25 found itself even more hard-pressed to defend the ruins of Authie and Buron. Here they were attacked by the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, which had not forgotten that its advance on June 7 had been halted in these villages by the Hitler Youth Division. The III./25 resisted "with the bitterness expected of the 12th SS Panzer Division",[89] as the Canadian official history puts it, but was still forced to abandon Buron by mid-morning. An isolated pocket of SS Grenadiers would continue to resist in the village until the next day, but were finally wiped out by the Canadians.[90]

Once again, accounts of the fighting during the initial stages of the allied attack are filled with descriptions of the tenacious resistance offered by the young SS soldiers. A Canadian news correspondent told, for example, of an SS Grenadier "who held out in a slit trench, catching Canadian grenades and throwing them back before they exploded. Finally, one blew his right arm off. He threw back another with his left hand before he missed one and was killed."[91]

By the late morning, a crisis had developed on the division's right flank, as the front of the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division began to disintegrate. This untried unit had been badly shaken by the opening allied artillery barrage, and proved no match for the more experienced British troops. Kurt Meyer immediately dispatched his Mark IV battalion and the Divisional Escort Company to help prevent the front from collapsing altogether. Yet even the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division itself was gradually being pushed back under the weight of the allied attacks. By the late afternoon, St. Contest and Authie had fallen, and the Canadians could see SS soldiers withdrawing southward in some disorder. By the late evening, only scattered pockets of the Hitler Youth Division stood between the advancing British and Canadians, and the city of Caen.[92]

At this point, Field Marshal Rommel and General Eberbach issued orders that all heavy weapons were to be withdrawn from Caen during the night. The remaining infantry units were to continue to resist in the city and withdraw southward across the Orne River only when attacked by "superior forces".[93] Kurt Meyer claims that he had recognized the senselessness of continuing the fight for Caen, and had already begun to withdraw the 12th SS Panzer Division across the Orne shortly after midnight. The formal orders for withdrawal were only issued by General

Eberbach at 3:00 a.m. on July 9, but by this time the evacuation was already well underway.[94]

Under cover of darkness, most of the remnants of the 12th SS Panzer Division were able to cross safely over the Orne River. Several scattered units, which found their lines of retreat blocked, refused to surrender and continued fighting until destroyed by the British and Canadians -- some as long as forty-eight hours later. At noon on July 9, the rearguard of the division finally crossed over the Orne, and the last bridge over the river was blown. That afternoon, the three allied divisions moved forward to occupy Caen -- thirty-three days later than had been prescribed in their original invasion plans.[95]

The battle for Caen has been described by at least one author as representing the "Stalingrad" of the Hitler Youth Division in Normandy.[96] A report by Army Group D on July 9 established that the division had been reduced to one battalion, or one-sixth of its authorized strength. It was now nothing more than a shadow of the formation which had gone into action at the beginning of June. In fact, between June 6 and July 9, the 12th SS Panzer Division had suffered 4,485 casualties, the heaviest of any German armoured division in the West. This was reflected by the casualties among its senior officers, the division having lost its commander, one regimental commander, and four battalion commanders since the beginning of June. In addition, the 12th SS had lost over half of its original complement of tanks, assault guns and armoured personnel carriers.[97]

Under normal circumstances, the 12th SS would have been withdrawn from the front for refitting. Kurt Meyer apparently discussed the possibilities of this with Field Marshal von Kluge. However, the fact that there were no troops available to replace it meant that it would

have to remain near the front line in reserve.[98] On July 11, the division was therefore relieved of its sector along the southern bank of the Orne River by the 272nd Infantry Division, and placed in reserve near Potigny, seven miles north of Falaise. Here it was brought up to the strength of a reinforced regiment after combing through all its administrative personnel and the arrival of one replacement battalion. Kurt Meyer divided this force into two battle-groups: one under the command of SS Lt. Colonel Bernhard Krause, and one under SS Major Waldmüller.[99]

The division remained near Potigny until July 16, when Hitler ordered that it move north-east to join the Fifteenth Army as a tactical armoured reserve. Hitler feared that the allies might still undertake a second seaborne landing against the Fifteenth Army's coastline in order to strike at the launching sites of German V-weapons.[100] The division was therefore already on its way north-east on July 18, when the British launched a major armoured offensive, Operation "Goodwood", to the south of Caen.

The failure of the British and Canadians to achieve a decisive victory at Caen on July 8 and 9, had raised the danger for the allies that the Germans would now begin to divert their armour west of the Normandy front. There, General Montgomery intended that the American First Army should make a major break in the German line and follow it up by driving to the Seine River. Montgomery therefore had ordered a major armoured offensive on the Caen sector in order to keep the bulk of the German armour pinned down on the front of the British Second Army in the east.[101]

Operation "Goodwood" was launched on the morning of July 18, and made considerable progress by mid-day. The result was that Army Group B made an urgent request to the OKW at 1:20 p.m. to release the 12th SS

Panzer Division and allow it to intervene in the battle. Only after repeated urgings did the OKW finally grant its permission at 3:20 p.m., and the 12th SS immediately changed its course.[102] After travelling for most of the night, the division's two battle-groups finally reached the Caen sector on the morning of July 19, and took up a position astride the Caen-Vimont road. Here they helped to frustrate a drive by the Guards Armoured Division in the direction of Vimont. However, the main impetus of the British offensive had already been broken, and the entire operation was finally halted by Montgomery on July 20, after having advanced only five miles.[103]

Many allied observers considered Operation "Goodwood" to have been a dismal failure, but the colossal material superiority which the allies had displayed in the offensive had at least made most German commanders truly aware of how futile the defensive battle in Normandy had become. Field Marshal von Kluge echoed their opinions in a report submitted to Hitler on July 21, in which he said:

> I arrived here with the firm intention of carrying out your orders to hold fast at all costs. But when one realizes that the price which must be paid consists of the slow but steady annihilation of our troops -- I am thinking particularly of the Hitlerjugend Division whose conduct deserves the highest commendation -- and when one sees that the flow of supplies of almost every sort and also of reinforcements is completely inadequate, while our artillery and anti-tank guns are quite incapable of fighting the type of battle that has been ordered. . . then one cannot help entertaining the gravest doubts as to what the immediate future holds in store for this front. . . . despite all our fervent efforts, the moment is approaching when this sorely tried front will be broken. Once the enemy has penetrated into open country, organized operations will no longer be possible to control owing to our troops' lack of mobility. As the responsible commander on this front, I regard it as my duty to draw your attention, my Fuehrer, to the consequences that will ensue.[104]

The break in the German line which von Kluge feared was not long in coming. Between July 25 and July 30, the American First Army in the

west succeeded in piercing the left flank of the German Seventh Army and driving south into open country. With American tanks fanning out from this breach in the line, and with the German center and right still under strong allied pressure, reason now dictated that the German front in Normandy be withdrawn to the Seine River in order to avoid a disastrous encirclement.

Yet Hitler was not inclined to be "reasonable", nor was he willing to listen to the advice of his generals, especially in light of the attempt on his life by army officers on July 20. Instead of sanctioning a withdrawal, he ordered that a major armoured offensive be launched on the western sector of the Normandy front to restore the situation. The armour for this operation was to be obtained by stripping the Caen sector of all available panzer divisions. The result was that by August 4, both the II. SS Panzer Corps and the 1st SS Panzer Division had been moved westward for the proposed attack. This left only the battered 12th SS Panzer Division to the south of Caen, which was also intended eventually to be moved west for the impending attack.[105]

Since mid-July, the 12th SS Panzer Division had continued to hold the right flank of the I. SS Panzer Corps' line astride the Caen-Vimont road. It was only on the evening of August 4/5 that it was finally relieved by the 272nd Infantry Division, and ordered south-east of Falaise to be rested. However, the fact that there were no divisions remaining to the south of Caen resulted instead in the division being held in reserve along the Caen-Falaise highway. Here it was reinforced by the 19 heavy Tiger tanks of the 101st SS Heavy Tank Battalion.[106]

On August 6, I. SS Panzer Corps ordered the division to send one of its battle-groups to assist in a counter-attack against the British bridgehead over the Orne River near Thury Harcourt. On the morning of

August 7, Battle-Group Krause, composed primarily of men of the I./26 and tanks of the division's Mark IV battalion, was therefore ordered to move toward the Thury-Harcourt bridgehead.[107] Little was it known to the division that within a matter of hours its own sector would be hit by a massive Canadian offensive, Operation "Totalize".

That operation called for three Canadian infantry divisions, one Canadian armoured division, and one Polish armoured division to pierce the weakened front of the I. SS Panzer Corps south of Caen, and drive toward Falaise. The attack began on the evening of August 7 with a preliminary air bombardment, and was followed up by the novel experiment of having the infantry and armour advance under the cover of darkness. The main force of the attack fell upon the sector of the 89th Infantry Division, which was positioned four miles to the south of Caen, astride the Caen-Falaise highway. The air bombardment alone succeeded in practically annihilating the 89th Division, and its survivors could do little to halt the Canadian advance.[108]

Kurt Meyer had taken the precaution of attaching liason officers to the infantry divisions holding the front line, and the 12th SS Panzer Division thereby received early news of the attack. Hubert Meyer immediately ordered Battle-Group Waldmüller, made up of the I./25 and II./25, along with 8 or 10 Tiger tanks of the 101st SS Heavy Tank Battalion, to move north to block the Caen-Falaise highway near Bretteville-le-Rabet. At the same time, Kurt Meyer, who characteristically preferred the excitement of combat to the routine of divisional headquarters, himself set out in the direction of the 89th Division's front to assess the situation.[109]

Near Cintheaux, Meyer encountered a disorderly group of panic-stricken soldiers from the 89th Division who were retreating down the

Caen-Falaise highway (the first German soldiers he had ever seen in flight during the war). He later described how he was able to halt their rout in his own unique manner:

> I realized that something had to be done to send these men back into the line and fight. I lit a cigar, stood in the middle of the road and in a loud voice asked them if they were going to leave me alone to cope with the enemy. Hearing a divisional commander address them in this way, they stopped, hesitated, and then returned to their positions.[110]

After assessing the situation, Meyer ordered Battle-Group Waldmüller, accompanied by the division's Panther battalion and the 101st Heavy Tank Battalion, to move north and immediately counter-attack the advancing Canadians. At the same time, the Divisional Escort Company and one company of self-propelled anti-tank guns were ordered to take up defensive positions near St. Sylvain, three miles east of the Caen-Falaise highway. Finally, Battle-Group Krause was told to disengage itself from the Thury-Harcourt bridgehead and re-join the other elements of the division.[111]

At approximately 12 o'clock, Meyer personally accompanied Battle-Group Waldmüller as it went forward to engage the advancing 1st Polish Armoured Division and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, north of Cintheaux. Operating in small groups, the German Tigers and Panthers were able to use the superior range of their weapons, plus the hesitancy of the allied tank commanders, to take a heavy toll of the enemy's armour. The Poles were finally forced to halt near St. Aignan by the late afternoon, after reporting heavy casualties inflicted by Tiger tanks "covering with fire all country" in the region. The Canadians had meanwhile been able to take the village of Cintheaux, but the continued stiff resistance of Battle-Group Waldmüller prevented them from making any additional gains that day.[112]

On the 12th SS Panzer Division's right flank, the small force of defenders in St. Sylvain had not only been able to hold up the advance of elements of the 1st Polish Armoured Division, but it had also succeeded in knocking out a considerable number of the Poles' tanks. However, on the division's left flank, serious problems arose at the village of Bretteville-sur-Laize, which was held only by disorganized remnants of the 89th Infantry Division. Here the 3rd Canadian Division had succeeded in overrunning these demoralized defenders and had occupied the village by the late afternoon, thereby threatening the flank of Battle-Group Waldmüller. It was therefore considered necessary to disengage the 12th SS Panzer Division after nightfall, and to take up new positions along the Laison River, three miles to the south.[113]

By first light on August 9, all units of the 12th SS were in position along the Laison River in readiness for a renewed Canadian attack. The division was joined here by a considerable number of 88mm guns from Lt.-General Wolfgang Pickert's newly-arrived III Flak Corps. These were used to help establish a thin screen of anti-tank gun positions along the Laison front.[114]

Yet surprisingly, most sectors of the 12th SS Panzer Division saw no appreciable action on August 9. This was primarily a result of errors and confusion on the side of the Canadians. On the night of August 8/9, the tanks of the 28th Canadian Armoured Regiment, along with two companies of the Algonquin Infantry Regiment, had been ordered to capture Hill 195, an important observation point west of the Caen-Falaise highway. Somehow these units had lost their way in the darkness and had mistaken Hill 140, east of the highway, for their objective.[115] Unaware of this Canadian error, SS Colonel Max Wünsche lost little time in ordering an assault against the exposed Canadian tanks and infantry, which were dis-

covered directly in front of the German line at daybreak. With Tiger tanks attacking from the west, and Panthers moving in from the east, as well as supporting fire coming from German artillery and mortars, the Canadians were virtually annihilated. Their radio calls for air and ground support were of no use, since they still believed themselves to be on Hill 195. By nightfall, their last survivors finally slipped out of their position, after having lost 47 tanks and suffered 240 casualties. By comparison, German casualties had been almost negligible.[116]

The confusion caused by the unknown whereabouts of the 28th Armoured Regiment on August 9, had halted most other Canadian operations. As a result, the Canadians endeavoured to restore the now flagging momentum of their offensive on the following day. To the west of the Caen-Falaise highway, they had been able to occupy Hill 195 during the night of August 9/10. They therefore hoped to push further south from the hill on the morning of August 10. However, a fierce counter-attack by SS Major Erich Olboetter's III/26, and the fire of a considerable number of 88mm guns which were positioned on this sector, served to discourage the seemingly indecisive Canadian plans. The Canadians ultimately chose not to advance further south from the hill that day, and dug themselves in on that sector.

Meanwhile, the far eastern flank of the 12th SS Panzer Division was the scene of heavier fighting on August 10. Here, the 1st Polish Armoured Division endeavoured to outflank the 12th SS, and establish a bridgehead over the Laison River. However, the Poles were held up for several hours by a single German anti-tank gun crew near Maizieres, which knocked out nine enemy tanks before itself being destroyed. It then appeared as if the Polish division would have a clear path to the Laison River, when one company of the 12th SS Anti-Tank Battalion

arrived on the scene. With its self-propelled anti-tank guns, the company was able to halt the Polish advance after destroying forty enemy tanks in less than two hours. The commander of the company, SS Lieutenant Hurdelbrink, himself destroyed eleven Polish tanks during the engagement, and would receive the Knight's Cross for his actions.[118]

The Canadians made one final attempt to regain the lost momentum of Operation "Totalize" on the evening of August 10. The 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade was to strike south along the Caen-Falaise highway, clear the Quesnay Woods, and advance as far as the village of Potigny, six miles north of Falaise. The attack went forward at eight in the evening, and at first appeared as if it might encounter relatively little resistance. Yet the Canadians soon discovered that Battle-Group Waldmüller, supported by the tanks of Wünsche's armoured group and Pickert's screen of 88 mm guns, had only been holding their fire. In the diminishing daylight, the Germans finally opened fire with devastating effects. The leading company of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada was completely cut off and destroyed in Quesnay Woods. After further heavy losses, and with the growing darkness making artillery support ineffective, the Canadian attack was finally halted.[119]

The failure of the assault against Quesnay Woods finally convinced the Canadians officially to bring Operation "Totalize" to an end. The offensive had certainly proven to be a grave disappointment. Despite the overwhelming numerical superiority of the allied forces involved, "Totalize" had succeeded in advancing only nine miles between August 7 and 10 -- still seven miles short of its objective of Falaise. It is certainly true that a lack of decisive leadership on the part of Canadian and Polish tank commanders was in part responsible for the poor performance of allied units during the attack. Yet it cannot be denied that

the skilled and almost fanatical resistance still being offered by the 12th SS Panzer Division also contributed significantly to the disappointing results of the offensive. The 400 men and 45 tanks of the battered division had played a remarkable part in halting the five enemy divisions which were pitted against them. As the Canadian official history recognizes, the Hitler Youth Division "was to be the backbone of the resistance which so seriously impeded our progress towards Falaise."[120]

Ironically, on the evening of August 7, just as Operation "Totalize" was getting underway, Hitler had ordered the 12th SS Panzer Division to begin moving west to join the armoured counter-offensive against the Americans at Avranches. The order was later withdrawn after the division became involved in the desperate efforts to halt the Canadian attack.[121] Yet it had served to illustrate how Hitler was completely divorced from the realities of the Normandy front. Indeed, the fact that Hitler had committed most of the German armour in Normandy to the Avranches offensive, had actually improved allied prospects of encircling the entire German front. General Montgomery had originally envisaged a large encircling movement, driving the Germans back against the Seine, and cutting off their line of retreat with American armour. However, with most German panzer divisions concentrated in the west, Montgomery now saw that a shorter encirclement could be achieved if the Canadian First Army, coming from the north, could link up with the American Third Army, coming from the south. Thus, on August 10, the American XV Corps, which had already reached Le Mans in its drive eastward, was ordered to turn north toward Argentan. At the same time, the Canadians were ordered to launch a renewed attack southward in the hope of eventually joining up with the Americans near Falaise.[122]

The 12th SS Panzer Division was apparently well aware of this

growing danger of encirclement, for on August 11, all staffs and cadres of its shattered combat units as well as all the division's support units were transferred east to be moved across the Seine River. However, no plans were made for the evacuation of the division itself. Instead, it was simply pulled back to a point four miles north of Falaise, while its position at the front was taken over by the newly-arrived 85th Infantry Division.[123]

This move appears to have been part of a policy being adopted along the entire German front in Normandy of placing regular infantry divisions in the front line, while Waffen-SS units were held in reserve. The Waffen-SS units were apparently intended to act as "battle police" and hold the regular Wehrmacht formations in the front line. At the same time, this also allowed the infantry divisions to take the brunt of the massive air and artillery bombardments which usually preceded an allied attack, while preserving the more valuable Waffen-SS formations for defensive operations.[124]

The success of this policy was shown when the Canadians began the expected renewal of their push toward Falaise on August 14. Operation "Tractable" began with a massive air bombardment at mid-day, followed by an assault by two columns of infantry and tanks against German positions north of the Laison River and east of the Caen-Falaise highway. As could be expected, the 85th Infantry Division disintegrated after the air attack, and the Canadians were able to overrun its positions and cross the Laison River. By the late evening, they had advanced as far south as the thin defensive screen of the 12th SS Panzer Division, four miles north of Falaise, before halting for the night.[125]

On the morning of August 15, the Canadians resumed their attack, yet hopes of repeating the previous day's success were disappointed. The

focal point of the fighting was Hill 159, which controlled the important road network directly to the north of Falaise. Here repeated attacks by two Canadian armoured regiments were unable to dislodge the defending tanks and Grenadiers of the 12th SS Panzer Division, who were supported by remnants of the 85th Infantry Division. Many of these regular soldiers did not willingly join the defence, for those who were caught without weapons were shot on the spot by SS officers and NCOs.[126]

The fight for Hill 159 dragged on throughout the day and was resumed again on August 16. This surprising failure of the numerically superior Canadians to take the hill was, to a certain extent, again the result of their own indecisiveness and even incompetence. Yet the determination of the SS Grenadiers "to die rather than to give in" was equally important. This was reflected by the mounting casualties among the defenders. Even Kurt Meyer himself was wounded near the hill that afternoon, although he was able to remain with his troops. In the end, the 12th SS was forced to abandon Hill 159, not because of the repeated Canadian attacks, but because of threatening developments on its rear left flank. Here the 2nd Canadian Division had succeeded in pushing its way into the ruined city of Falaise from the west. The entire 12th SS Panzer Division was therefore forced to withdraw southward to a new line running from Falaise six miles east to Morteaux-Couliboeuf.[127]

August 17 was characterized by confused and desperate fighting as the remnants of the 12th SS endeavoured to hold their rapidly crumbling front. In the east, the 1st Polish Armoured Division sought to establish a bridgehead over the Dives River near Jort. The only remaining battery of the 12th SS Panzer Division's 88 mm anti-tank guns was hurriedly dispatched to this sector in an attempt to halt the Poles, but was completely destroyed before being able to deploy its guns.[128] In Falaise itself,

scattered remnants of the Hitler Youth Division continued to carry out house-to-house fighting throughout the day. Sixty Grenadiers were eventually surrounded in the Ecole Superieure in the center of the town, but refused to surrender. They continued to offer resistance until 2:00 a.m. on August 18, when the Canadians made a final assault on the building and set it on fire. Only four men escaped from the school; the rest continued to fight to the end. None had surrendered.[129]

The deteriorating situation along the front of the 12th SS Panzer Division was paralleled by the increasingly perilous position of the entire German front in Normandy. The fall of Falaise on August 16 had narrowed the gap between the advancing Canadian and American forces to only twelve miles. It was only then that Hitler had finally agreed to allow the German Seventh Army and the Fifth Panzer Army (the new designation of Panzer Group West) to withdraw eastward to avoid an allied encirclement. The result was that by the afternoon of August 17, the Germans were streaming toward the narrowing exit between Falaise and Argentan which was still held open in the north by the remnants of the I. SS Panzer Corps.[130]

Among these remnants was the Hitler Youth Division, which endeavoured to maintain at least the semblance of a line between the Dives River and Falaise. Behind its weakened front, the retreat through the gap had become a full flood by August 18. In their desperation to escape the allied encirclement, the Germans were forced to move during daylight hours, thereby exposing themselves to repeated allied fighter bomber attacks. With roads to the east crowded with men, vehicles and equipment, the fighter bombers were able to transform the withdrawal into a nightmare of carnage and destruction.[131]

On the night of August 18/19, the headquarters of the 12th SS

Panzer Division was overrun by the Canadians, and the division was finally forced to fall back to the south-east. During the withdrawal, SS Colonel Wünsche and his staff mistakenly drove into Canadian lines and were taken prisoner. Kurt Meyer and the remaining 200 men of the division were able to make their way towards Trun, where by chance they came upon the headquarters of the Seventh Army. Here they learned that allied forces north and south of the gap had made contact at Chambois, thereby completing a loose encirclement of all German units still west of the Dives River. The commander of the Seventh Army, SS General Hausser, therefore gave orders for a break-out attempt between Chambois and St. Lambert to be carried out on the night of August 19/20.

Shortly after midnight, the remnants of the 12th SS Panzer Division began moving east under the cover of darkness, but were only able to reach the village of Chambois by daybreak. Consequently, the sky was already swarming with allied fighter bombers when Meyer's group was forced to fight its way across the Dives River on the morning of August 20. Despite the destruction and wild confusion which surrounded them on all sides, Meyer and his men were able to ford the small river with surprisingly few casualties, and continued to push east in the hope of linking up with those German units which had escaped the encirclement.[132]

It should be pointed out that the determination of Meyer's group to fight its way out of the pocket was not shared by many regular Wehrmacht soldiers. Meyer himself later acknowledged that hundreds of regular soldiers had endeavoured to rescue themselves from the hell-like cauldron by running towards the allied lines with white flags. What Meyer fails to mention, however, is the fact that these men were often shot down by SS soldiers, who considered surrender to be both traiterous and cowardly. One Canadian officer described how many Germans "were

unable to give up, for every move towards our lines brought bursts of fire from certain SS troops patrolling the low ground behind them in an armoured half-track."[133] Another Canadian officer described how herds of grey-clad German soldiers

> . . . would come close enough to the high ground to make a pretense of a counter attack. These "attacks" were ninety percent purposeless. The bewildered wretches making them obviously wanted to surrender, but the SS men and other units still wanting to fight wouldn't let them. So they came on with a hollow show of fight -- hoping to get out of range of the SS guns in time to throw their hands up before a Canadian or British bullet got them. It was one of the most inhumanly stupid and degrading scenes imaginable.[134]

Meyer and his bedraggled group of 200 men were able to avoid enemy units east of the Dives River and made contact with the 2nd SS Panzer Division near Vimoutiers late on the afternoon of August 20. Here it was learned that those elements of the 12th SS Panzer Division which had been withdrawn to the east before the encirclement had been formed into a small battle-group under SS Major Gerd Bremer. Meyer was immediately dispatched to rejoin Bremer's group, which brought the official strength of the Hitler Youth Division to 300 men, 10 tanks and no artillery.[135]

After the disaster of the Falaise-Argentan pocket, Hitler and the new Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal Model, hoped that a new front might be established along the Seine River. Yet the fact that the Americans were able to cross the Seine near Paris on August 21, and then turned north to threaten a wider encirclement, made it apparent that only the permanent fortifications of the West Wall, running from the Dutch-German frontier to the Swiss-German border, offered any hope of establishing a stable front.

During the remaining days of August, the remnants of the 12th SS Panzer Division were therefore forced to withdraw with other German units

across the north of France and into Belgium. It was during this withdrawal that Kurt Meyer was surprised by an advancing American column and taken prisoner near Namur on September 7. He was replaced as commander by the division's senior staff officer, SS Major Hubert Meyer, who guided the division into its assigned defensive positions in the West Wall on September 10 and 11. One week later, the division was ordered to return to the interior of the Reich for a complete refitting. After three months of bloody fighting on the battlefields of France, the Hitler Youth Division was finally to be given a respite.

The 12th SS Panzer Division had fought heroically, if not fanatically, throughout the entire Normandy campaign. Despite the growing hopelessness of the German cause, the young SS Grenadiers had repeatedly proved to be the backbone of resistance against British and Canadian attacks on the Caen sector. Their steadfastness and ferocity had evoked the awe, though not always respect, of friend and foe alike. Typical was the assessment of the division given by a Canadian rifleman in the Royal Winnipeg Rifle Regiment:

> The only guys who really earn medals in this war are those SS birds. Every one of them deserves a V.C. They're a bad bunch of bastards, but are they ever soldiers! They make us fellows look like amateurs. They'll come out at you to surrender with their hands up and a grenade with the firing pin pulled out inside each fist. . . . They'll stay in a slit trench and let a tank pass right over them and then come up and blast it with a bazooka, knowing damned well that the next tank or the infantry coming behind will get them for sure. They hate our Canadian guts. How they ever manage to stand all that big stuff coming down on them like they do and then come up fighting, is beyond me. Us guys couldn't stand it, and I'm not just speaking for myself neither.[136]

The leadership provided by young SS officers such as Kurt Meyer, Max Wünsche, Erich Olboetter, or Bernhard Krause, undoubtedly contributed

to the 12th SS Panzer Division's amazing performance in Normandy. Meyer, in particular, personified the aggressive and reckless type of leadership which served to inspire the young Grenadiers toward the incredible feats of bravery and endurance which characterized the campaign. Leaving the more mundane chores of divisional headquarters to his senior staff officer, Meyer seemed to thrive on the risks and dangers of the front, and was repeatedly found in the van of a counter-attack or in the very thick of a defensive battle.

To be sure, the operational capabilities of officers such as Meyer are open to question. The only actual offensive operations carried out by the division on June 7 and 8, had revealed serious shortcomings as far as the judgement and tactical skill of the division's officers were concerned. Yet the 12th SS Panzer Division had distinguished itself in Normandy not by its offensive successes, but by its defensive victories. Its greatest virtue had not been its tactical skill, but instead the ability to retain its fierce fighting spirit even under hopeless circumstances. For this, the leadership provided by SS officers such as Kurt Meyer had been well suited.

The 12th SS Panzer Division had practically fought to its own annihilation in Normandy. However, its fierce resistance had ultimately been in vain. The Germans had suffered a disastrous defeat in France, and their forces in the West were nothing more than a disorganized collection of burnt-out formations by September 1944. A major share of the responsibility for this disaster must rest with Adolf Hitler. His constant interference in operations in Normandy and his refusal to accept the recommendations of commanders at the front had ultimately played into allied hands and allowed them to establish a firm foothold in Western Europe -- a foothold which would prove fatal for Germany. Yet Hitler

himself had not given up hope. He intended to continue the struggle, and by the autumn of 1944, had already begun planning a new German offensive to regain the initiative in the West. The 12th SS Panzer Division would soon find itself once again committed to battle.

NOTES - CHAPTER II

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2 Eddy Bauer, Der Panzerkrieg, Die wichtigsten Panzeroperationen des zweiten Weltkrieges in Europa und Afrika, 2 vols. (Bonn: Verlag Offene Worte, 1965), 2: 87.

3 Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmacht-führungsstab, 1940-1945, 5 vols., eds., Percy Ernst Schramm et. al. (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1961-1963), 4: 299; The Rommel Papers, ed. B. H. Liddell Hart (London: Collins, 1953), pp. 452-453.

4 Milton Shulman, Defeat in the West (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947), p. 99; Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 281; L. F. Ellis, Victory in the West, vol. 1, The Battle of Normandy, [History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series] (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), p. 119.

5 Charles P. Stacey, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, vol. 3: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945 (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), pp. 59-63.

6 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 27; Stacey, Victory, p. 63.

7 Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gren. Rgt. 25, 12. SS Panzer Div. "Hitlerjugend", June 6, 1944; Miscellaneous SS Records: Einwandererzentralstelle, Waffen-SS, and SS-Oberabschnitte (Washington, The National Archives), Microcopy T-354, roll 156, frame 3799970 (hereafter cited as T-354/156/3799970).

8 Stacey, Victory, p. 122.

9 Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939-1945, trans. R. H. Barry (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 425.

10 Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere (Munich: Schild-Verlag, 1957), pp. 208-209; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 6, 1944; T-354/156/3799970.

11 Bodo Zimmerman, "France, 1944," in The Fatal Decisions, eds. Seymour Freidin and William Richardson (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), p. 187; James J. Weingartner, Hitler's Guard: The Story of the Leib-standarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945 (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 95; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 209; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 6, 1944; T-354/156/3799970.

12 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 288; Fritz Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. C-024 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 10; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 6, 1944; T-354/156/3799970. The division was also hampered by the fact that it had expected to draw fuel at a dump near Evrecy which had been destroyed by fighter bomber attacks earlier that day. See Wilmot, Struggle, p. 288.

13 Warlimont, Hitler's Headquarters, pp. 425-426; Ellis, Victory, p. 236.

14 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 211; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 6, 1944; T-354/156/3799970. Upon his arrival Meyer is reported to have said: "I have been on my way to you for about eight hours; I lay a good four hours in roadside ditches because of air attacks. The division's marching columns are suffering serious losses in men and material." Cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 129-130.

15 Cited in Shulmann, Defeat, p. 105.

16 Cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 130.

17 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 296; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944", p. 14. Meyer claims that the 26th Regiment was still east of the Orne River, and that the I./12th SS Panzer Regiment was even further east of the Orne by mid-day on June 7. See Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 216-217.

18 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 216; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 7, 1944; T-354/156/3799971; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944", p. 20.

19 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 79, 111-112, 126.

20 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 218-219.

21 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 131-132; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 218-219; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 7, 1944; T-354/156/3799971.

22 The Canadian 9th Brigade had apparently been without artillery support earlier on in the afternoon because it had been out of range of its supporting batteries. In addition, calls for naval fire support had not gotten through. See Ellis, Victory, p. 229.

23 Cited in Alexander McKee, Caen: Anvil of Victory (London: Souvenir Press, 1964), pp. 78-79.

24 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 219. Surprisingly, Meyer seems partially to blame the 21st Panzer Division for the failure of his own attack to make better progress, while forgetting that he had decided to embark upon the attack without its consent.

25 Ibid., p. 220; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 132. The enemy force proved to be the Canadian 7th Infantry Brigade.

26 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 133.

27 Ibid., p. 132; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 231.

28 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 222.

29 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 299; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 21.

30 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 96; Wilmot, Struggle, p. 299.

31 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 135-136; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 222. The Royal Winnipeg Rifles had 256 casualties on June 8. The Canadian Scottish Regiment had 125, on June 8-9, most of which were suffered during the counter-attack on June 8.

32 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 223-224; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 136.

33 Brigadier Foster, cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 137.

34 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 96; Wilmot, Struggle, p. 300, Paul Carell, Invasion, They're Coming! (Toronto: Bantam, 1964), p. 160.

35 Ellis, Victory, pp. 247, 250.

36 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 139-140; McKee, Caen, pp. 89-92; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 232-233.

37 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 138-139; McKee, Caen, pp. 92-93.

38 The official historian of the Regiment de la Chaudière, cited in McKee, Caen, p. 93.

39 Ellis, Victory, p. 258; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," pp. 32-33.

40 The Rommel Papers, p. 476. Strangely enough, General Geyr would later blame Rommel for the fact that the armoured divisions were left in the line. However, the evidence does not support his accusation. See Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, "Reflections on the Invasion," Military Review 51 (March 1961): p. 12.

41 Kriegstagebuch des OKW, 4: 316; Ellis, Victory, p. 268.

42 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 29.

43 Cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 140.

44 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 29; Bataillons Befehl, July 2, 1944; T-354/154/3797540-41.

45 Cited in McKee, Caen, pp. 95-96.

46 The war diary of the I./25 reports harrassing fire from enemy artillery almost every day for the month of June.

47 Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 14, 1944; T-354/156/3799981; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 37. Meyer gives June 16 as the date of Witt's death, but he would appear to be mistaken. See Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 236.

48 Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1, I./SS Pz. Gr. Rgt. 25, June 11-20, 1944; T-354/156/3799978ff.

49 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944,", p. 41.

50 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 99.

51 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 39.

52 Ibid., p. 45; McKee, Caen, p. 81; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 207. The 12th SS Radio Reconnaissance Unit had been formed as early as the spring of 1944, while the division was still training in Belgium. Its activities in Normandy were helped by the fact that a list of enemy radio codes had been captured early in the campaign, and by the fact that the allies were notoriously careless with the information they conveyed by radio.

53 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 243.

54 Ellis, Victory, pp. 271-276.

55 The Nebelwerfer was a multi-barrelled rocket launcher which could deliver sudden and destructive mass fire on level targets. For a detailed description of their development and use see Helmut Nitschke, "Die deutsche Werfertruppe, 1939-1945," Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau 4 (1954): 426-440. The allies later claimed that over 70 per cent of their casualties in Normandy had been caused by German mortars and Nebelwerfers. See Ellis, Victory, p. 550.

56 McKee, Caen, pp. 148-162; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 244-249; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 50.

57 Cited in Ellis, Victory, p. 279.

58 "Gefechtsbericht zum 26. Juni 1944." SS-Pz.Pi.Btl. 12, July 3, 1944; T-354/156/3797709-14. The 12th SS Panzer Division's Ia officer, SS-Major Hubert Meyer, claimed that radio messages from British attacks against other remnants of the engineer battalion were still being picked up as late as June 28. See McKee, Caen, p. 149.

59 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 52; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 248.

60 Ellis, Victory, p. 280; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 246-247.

61 McKee, Caen, p. 167.

62 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 251.

63 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 102.

64 Cited in McKee, Caen, pp. 173-174.

65 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 101-102.

66 McKee, Caen, p. 145.

67 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 254.

68 Cf. B.J.S. MacDonald, The Trial of Kurt Meyer (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1954), p. 15; Stacey, Victory in the West, pp. 133, 136; Peter Simonds, Maple Leaf Up, Maple Leaf Down: The Story of the Canadians in the Second World War (New York: Island Press, 1946), pp. 159-160.

69 Gerhard Rempel, "The Misguided Generation: Hitler Youth and SS, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971), p. 698.

70 McDonald, The Trial of Kurt Meyer, pp. 15-16; McKee, Caen, p. 203; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 230-231; Will R. Bird, No Retreating Footsteps: The Story of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Kentville Publishing Co., 1956), p. 126. Bird claims that the Canadians discovered the bodies of SS Grenadiers during the first days of the campaign, who had committed suicide rather than surrendering. This was undoubtedly a result of the rumors that the allies took no prisoners.

71 Trials of Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 - 1 October 1946, 42 vols. (Nuremberg, 1948), 4: 221-222.

72 The Canadians at War, 1939-1945, 2 vols. (Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd., 1969), 2: 471; H. Essame, The 43rd (Wessex) Division at War 1944-1945 (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1952), p. 23; Charles P. Stacey, The Canadian Army at War: Canada's Battle in Normandy (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1946), p. 74.

73 McKee, Caen, pp. 94-95.

74 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 230-231.

75 Paul Carell, Invasion, p. 163; McKee, Caen, pp. 198-199.

76 Essame, The 43rd Division, p. 131.

77 McKee, Caen, pp. 94-95.

78 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 346.

79 Ellis, Victory, pp. 320-322.

80 Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," pp. 60-61.

81 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 153; Ellis, Victory, p. 309.

82 Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 255; McKee, Caen, pp. 194-195.

83 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 155; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 258.

84 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 154-155; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 257-258.

85 Wilmot, Struggle, p. 350.

86 McKee, Caen, pp. 214-215. As McKee points out sarcastically: "If any of the British commanders had ever thought that they could intimidate the Germans by killing the French, they had been most gravely mistaken."

87 Cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 158.

88 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 102; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 161.

89 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 161.

90 Ibid.; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 260-262.

91 The Canadians at War, 2: 476.

92 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 262-267; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 161.

93 Ellis, Victory, p. 315.

94 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 267-268; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 162.

95 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 269-270.

96 Rempel, "The Misguided Generation," p. 602.

97 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 103; Ellis, Victory, p. 316; Martin Blumenson, United States Army in World War II; The European Theatre of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1961), p. 181; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 18.

98 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 103.

99 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 270-275; Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," p. 65.

100 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 104.

101 Ellis, Victory, pp. 327-332.

102 Ibid., pp. 340-344; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 177-178; John Sweet, Mounting the Threat: The Battle of Bourguebus Ridge, 18-23 July, 1944 (San Rafael, Cal.: Presidio Press, 1977), p. 68.

103 Ellis, Victory, pp. 349-350.

104 Cited in Zimmerman, "France 1944," p. 194.

105 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 108-109; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 211-212.

106 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 221; Blumenson, Breakout, p. 479.

107 SS Lt.-Colonel Hubert Meyer's narrative of the 12th SS Panzer Division, Manuscript No. P-164 (Ottawa: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1954), p. 61.

108 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 207-213.

109 Hubert Meyer, p. 61; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 221; Shulmann, Defeat, p. 148.

110 Cited in Shulmann, Defeat, p. 149.

111 Hubert Meyer, pp. 61-62.

112 Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 287-288; Hubert Meyer, p. 62; Stacey, Victory in the West, p. 224. Kurt Meyer claims that a small group of Grenadiers continued to hold Cintheaux late into the night. He is probably confusing this with resistance offered by a small group of Germans in a quarry half way between Cintheaux and Bretteville-le-Rabet, which gave the Canadians considerable difficulty.

113 Hubert Meyer, pp. 62-63.

114 Shulmann, Defeat, p. 150; Ellis, Victory, p. 420; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 110.

115 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 225-226.

116 Hubert Meyer, pp. 65-66; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 227-228.

117 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 227-229. Both Kurt and Hubert Meyer claim that Olboetter's III./26 occupied Hill 195 and was able to beat off Canadian attempts to capture it during the night. However, Canadian evidence shows that this was not the case.

118 Hubert Meyer, p. 67.

119 Ibid., p. 67; Meyer, Grenadiere, p. 296; Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 230-231. There is some confusion concerning the events of the evening of August 10. Kurt Meyer mistakenly has the assault taking place on August 11. Stacey has the assault being met by Battle-Group Krause.

120 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 221.

121 Ibid., pp. 220-221.

122 Ibid., pp. 231-234; Ellis, Victory, p. 407.

123 Hubert Meyer, pp. 67-68.

124 A Canadian newspaper correspondent wrote: "These SS men are mixed up among the infantry in small pockets to prevent them from surrendering. We find many German dead with bullets in their backs: and that can only mean one thing." See Alan Wood, The Falaise Road (Toronto: Macmillan, 1944), p. 47. See also E. Belfield and H. Essame, The Battle for Normandy (?: Severn House, 1975), p. 212; Report by the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1946), p. 280.

125 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, pp. 240-244; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 299-300.

126 McKee, Caen, p. 341.

127 Hubert Meyer, p. 69; Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 300-302.

128 Hubert Meyer, p. 70.

129 Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 250.

130 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 113-114.

131 Eddy Florentin, The Battle of the Falaise Gap (New York: Hawthorn, 1967), p. 249ff.

132 Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere, pp. 303-309.

133 Cited in Stacey, The Victory Campaign, p. 263.

134 Simonds, Maple Leaf Up, Maple Leaf Down, p. 246.

135 Hubert Meyer, pp. 73-74; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 115.

136 Cited in Simonds, Maple Leaf Up, Maple Leaf Down, pp. 208-209.

CHAPTER III

THE ARDENNES AND HUNGARY

On September 14, 1944, Hitler ordered SS General Sepp Dietrich to organize a new army for a future offensive operation against the West. The core of Dietrich's forces, designated Sixth Panzer Army, was to consist of four of the SS armoured formations which had fought in the Normandy campaign: the 1st, 2nd, 9th, and 12th SS Panzer Divisions. All of these units had suffered heavy losses during the fighting in France, and were therefore ordered out of the line to be completely refitted.[1]

Elements of the 12th SS Panzer Division were withdrawn from their positions along the West Wall in mid-September and sent to the Minden region, west of Hanover, for refurbishing. However the continued instability of the western front required that one battle-group of the 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment remain committed in the Aachen sector. As a result, the training and reorganization of the entire division was delayed until mid-October, when the battle-group was finally pulled out of the line.[2]

Command of the remnants of the 12th SS Panzer Division was given to SS Brigadier Fritz Kraemer in early October. Kraemer was somewhat of an anomaly in the Waffen-SS, having been a General Staff Corps officer in the regular Army before being attached to the I. SS Panzer Corps as chief of staff in 1943. His appointment as commander of the 12th SS was apparently intended to be only a temporary one, for the purpose of supervising the training and refitting of the worn-out division.[3]

The most immediate problem confronting Kraemer was the division's desperate shortage of manpower. It had lost almost 75 percent of its

personnel in the West, and would practically have to be re-built from scratch.[4] The Reich Youth Leadership undertook frantic recruiting efforts to help meet the personnel requirements of its once elite formation. Fifteen-year-old boys were drafted in some regions, and Artur Axmann even proposed establishing a separate reserve organization for the division. However, little came of these efforts to re-create an actual formation of Hitler Youths.[5] The SS Operations Department was ultimately forced to fill up the 12th SS with large numbers of wounded veterans and members of the Air Force or Navy who were hastily transferred to Waffen-SS status. By November 1944, such methods had restored the 12th SS to 90 per cent of its authorized strength in terms of personnel, although these troops were of a low calibre.[6]

The training of the 12th SS got underway in late October and early November, and was designed primarily to transform its inexperienced recruits into "useable" front-line soldiers in the shortest possible time. Since most replacements had not even received their basic training, they could only be given simple instruction in assault tactics, camouflage techniques, night fighting, construction of defensive positions, and the use of personal anti-tank weapons (the Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck). A shortage of ammunition prevented combat exercises from being carried out with live ammunition. There was also a serious shortage of drivers for tanks and combat vehicles. In Normandy, crews from disable tanks had suffered heavy casualties after being pressed into service as infantrymen. Most of the replacements which were received in October had no driving experience whatsoever, and could not be given a thorough training owing to a shortage of motor fuel. The result was that most drivers would receive at most only one or two hours of actual driving instruction before eventually being sent into action.[7]

Perhaps the most critical problem confronting the division during its training was the shortage of experienced officers and NCOs. The 12th SS had suffered irreplaceable casualties among its cadre of veteran commanders in Normandy, losing altogether an estimated 21 senior officers. The officers and NCOs who were chosen in October to replace them simply did not possess the necessary skill, experience or time to transform the division again into an elite fighting formation with its own unique esprit de corps.[8]

Kraemer was well aware of the fact that the hastily-reconstructed division left much to be desired as far as its cohesiveness and abilities were concerned.[9] In fact, it can probably be assumed that an attempt was made to remedy these problems by means of indoctrination, as was done in the case of the 1st SS Panzer Division. In the Leibstandarte, men were constantly reminded of the division's past heroic deeds and impressive combat record. More importantly, they were repeatedly told of the barbarity and uncivilized behaviour of their major adversary in the West, the Americans. Indoctrination sessions portrayed the American soldier as an unscrupulous mercenary, who was said to rape, plunder, and kill innocent German citizens. Through such propaganda, it was hoped that a certain amount of fighting spirit could be instilled into the new SS recruits, which would help to counteract their lack of military experience.[10]

On November 9, the training of the division was suddenly interrupted when the entire Sixth Panzer Army was ordered to the Cologne area to prevent a possible American breakthrough to the Rhine River. Because of the shortage of motor fuel, over sixty trains were needed to transport the 12th SS Panzer Division westward. By November 20, it had finally assembled in the Grevenbroich area, north-west of Cologne, where it was

ordered to resume its training.[11]

During the move, the division had once again experienced a change in commanding officers. On November 16, Fritz Kraemer was appointed chief of staff of the Sixth Panzer Army, and was succeeded as commander of the 12th SS by SS Colonel Hugo Kraas. Like Kurt Meyer, Kraas was one of the rising young officers in the Waffen-SS. He had joined the Leibstandarte in 1935, and by 1939 had become a platoon commander. During the Western campaign of 1940, he had commanded the Leibstandarte's motorcycle company, and had become the first soldier in the campaign to win the Iron Cross First Class. He had subsequently risen to become commander of the I. Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment in 1943, and commander of the regiment in 1944. At the time of his appointment as commander of the 12th SS, Kraas was only 33 years old.[12] It was undoubtedly hoped that he would be able to re-create Meyer's successes as the dashing young leader of the Hitler Youth Division.

Under Kraas's direction, the training of the 12th SS was continued throughout the second half of November. Training was helped by the fact that the division had received generous supplies of tanks and heavy equipment in October and November. The OKW had ordered that armoured divisions of the Sixth Panzer Army be given double the allocation of tanks given to regular armoured divisions. Hitler was apparently determined that his elite SS formations should be well-equipped for the tasks which lay ahead of them[13] The 12th SS was originally intended to receive approximately 120 Mark IV and Panther tanks; however, it ultimately obtained only 87. Since this could equip only one battalion the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, the Army's 560th Heavy Tank Destroyer Battalion, with roughly 36 self-propelled anti-tank guns, was also subordinated to the division. This brought the 12th SS to at least 70 percent of its

authorized strength in tanks and heavy weapons -- a remarkable accomplishment, considering the wartime strains upon Germany's industrial complex, and the complete exhaustion of the division when it began its refitting.[14]

While the training and re-equipping of the 12th SS Panzer Division was progressing through the autumn of 1944, Hitler's plans for an offensive had also been developing. On September 16, he announced to a handful of lieutenants that he intended to launch a massive offensive against the Ardennes -- the scene of the decisive German breakthrough into France and Belgium in 1940. Planning was begun under the utmost secrecy, and it was not until late October that high-ranking German commanders in the West were informed of Hitler's intentions.[15]

The final plans for the offensive called for the Sixth Panzer Army, Fifth Panzer Army, and Seventh Army to break through the sixty mile front of the American First Army between Monschau and Wasserbillig, and capture crossings over the Meuse River between Liège and Charleroi. From there they would drive toward Antwerp and the mouth of the Scheldt River, cutting off the British 21st Army Group and the northern wing of the American First Army. These would then be destroyed by the attacking forces in cooperation with Army Group H in the Netherlands.[16] Hitler believed that the offensive would "effect a decisive change in the western campaign, and thereby perhaps in the entire war."[17] A German victory would, he felt, force the allies to sue for peace, or at least lead to a split in their ranks between the Americans and the British.[18]

Of the three German armies participating in the offensive, the Sixth Panzer Army was the most powerful. It was to be given the leading role in the operation, taking the shortest route to Antwerp along the northern wing of the attack. Hitler was confident that Dietrich's four SS panzer divisions would be able to create the quick and decisive

breakthrough so necessary for a German success.[19] For this task, Dietrich also had at his disposal four Volksgrenadier Divisions[20] and one dismounted parachute division. These units were intended to make the initial breach in the American lines, clearing the way for the armour of the 1st SS Panzer Division and 12th SS Panzer Division (I. SS Panzer Corps), which were to spearhead the assault. The armour of the 2nd SS and 9th SS Panzer Divisions (II. SS Panzer Corps) was to be held in reserve, ready to exploit any favourable developments in the operation.[21]

Hitler's plans for the offensive produced serious misgivings among his senior military commanders. Most believed that the operation was beyond German capabilities, and that a much more limited offensive should be undertaken. In addition, the rough and heavily-wooded terrain of the Ardennes, coupled with unfavourable winter weather, were seen as being particularly unsuited for a large-scale armoured assault. There was also concern about the inexperience and lack of training among the attacking troops.[22]

Yet Hitler was determined to adhere to his original plans for the operation, despite the objections of his generals. His attitude was revealed at a conference at Bad Nauheim on December 12, where he spoke briefly with each of the army and corps commanders involved in the approaching offensive. When he met with Dietrich and asked, "Is your army ready?" Dietrich replied bluntly, "Not for an offensive." Hitler ended the conversation with the simple remark, "You are never satisfied."[23]

After several postponements, the attack date was finally fixed for the morning of December 16. Since the offensive had been shrouded in secrecy since September, Hugo Kraas learned only of its details and dimensions on December 6.[23] After hasty preparations by the staff of the 12th SS, the division finally moved out towards the Ardennes on the evening

of December 12. Marching only under the cover of darkness, it eventually reached its assembly area on the night of December 14, taking up a position behind the 277th Volksgrenadier Division, four miles east of Stadtkyll.[24]

Considering the important part which the 12th SS Panzer Division was expected to play in the assault, its level of training was far from adequate. In fact, by the beginning of December, combined arms operations had still not progressed beyond the level of reinforced battalions.[25] The success of the division was instead being pinned on the hope that the seemingly high morale among its troops would compensate for its lack of training. The belief that the men of the 12th SS were both confident and enthusiastic on the eve of the offensive, would appear to be supported by the contents of a letter, written on the early morning of December 16 by an SS lieutenant in the division, and later captured, unposted, by the Americans:

> I write during one of the momentous hours before we attack, full of excitement and expectation of what the next days will bring. . . . Some believe in living, but life is not everything! It is enough to know that we attack and will throw the enemy from our homeland. It is a holy task. Above me is the terrific noise of V 1's and artillery, the voice of war.

On the back of the envelope was written: "Ruth! Ruth! WE MARCH!"[26]

At 5:30 a.m. on December 16, German artillery opened a barrage along the entire Ardennes front. One half-hour later, the Sixth Panzer Army's infantry formations moved forward to attack. On the front of the I. SS Panzer Corps, the 277th Volksgrenadier was expected to open the Hollerath-Rocherath road for the 12th SS Panzer Division assembled behind it. The 12th SS was then to advance along the important Bullingen-Butgenbach-Malmedy highway, before driving north-west to the Meuse River. Further south, the 1st SS Panzer Division was expected to launch a

parallel drive to the Meuse, after infantry had seized the important road junction at Losheimergraben.[27]

From the very outset, the 12th SS found its advance plagued with difficulties. Hardly had the offensive begun, when the 277th Volksgrenadier Division became completely bogged down in the forest east of Rocherath-Krinkelt. Despite the complete surprise of their attack, the inexperienced infantry were unable to break through the thinly-manned front of the American 99th Infantry Division. By 10 a.m., Dietrich finally found it necessary to commit the I. Battalion of the 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment to help the stalled infantry push toward the villages.[28] In effect, the 12th SS was being called upon prematurely, not to exploit a breakthrough, but instead to help create one.

Yet even the SS Grenadiers found it impossible to crack the American front. In the heavily-wooded terrain, the I. Battalion was by necessity tied to the Hollerath-Rocherath road, which gave it little room to manoeuvre against the tenaciously-held American roadblocks. Moreover, the poor condition of the road itself severely limited the support which could be given by armoured vehicles. Consequently, by the evening of December 16, the battalion had only managed to reach the edge of the forest, east of Rocherath-Krinkelt.[29]

Thus, on the first day of the Ardennes offensive, most of the 12th SS Panzer Division had sat virtually immobile, waiting for a breach to be made in the American lines. Not only had it been unable to exploit the initial surprise of the German attack, but it had also found its timetable for a quick drive to the Meuse seriously jeopardized. The success of the division depended largely upon its being able to advance rapidly towards its objectives before the allies could react effectively. It was therefore imperative that the road junction at Rocherath-Krinkelt be taken at

once, in order to allow the division to begin its drive westward along the Bullingen-Butgenbach-Malmedy highway.

On the morning of December 17, the entire 25th Regiment, as well as the 12th SS Tank Destroyer Battalion, were combined with elements of the 277th Volksgrenadier Division for an assault against Rocherath-Krinkelt. After heavy fighting, the Americans were finally forced to withdraw from Rocherath by mid-day. However, subsequent attacks against Krinkelt were a complete failure. Here the Americans had been able to utilize the German delays of the previous day to reinforce the village with elements of the 2nd Infantry Division (which German intelligence had mistakenly believed to be in reserve near Elsenborn). The fierce resistance of the Americans in Krinkelt was also reportedly strengthened by unfounded rumours that the 12th SS was butchering its prisoners. In addition, the Americans later claimed that the German attacks against the village were poorly coordinated and often carried out in a piecemeal fashion -- the inexperience of the officers and men of the 12th SS was apparently making itself felt. By late evening, Krinkelt still remained in American hands.[30]

The attacks against the village were resumed on December 18. During the early morning hours, the 25th Regiment, along with the tanks of the I./12th SS Panzer Regiment, launched a direct frontal assault against the American positions. They were driven back by well-aimed anti-tank gun fire, and by support fire from the growing concentration of American artillery near Elsenborn. In the evening, several Panther tanks, accompanied by Grenadiers armed with anti-tank weapons, endeavoured to push their way into the village under the cover of darkness. Yet American armour, hidden behind walls, hedgerows and houses, was able easily to pick off the superior German tanks as they crossed in front of their gun sights. The American 741st Tank Battalion alone claimed to have knocked out an

estimated 27 German tanks, while losing only 11 of its own. By the end of the day, Krinkelt continued to remain in American hands.[31]

After three days of heavy fighting, the failure of the 12th SS Panzer Division to achieve a breakthrough at Krinkelt was the cause of grave concern within the German high command. The success of the entire offensive was threatened by the fact that the right wing of the Sixth Panzer Army had advanced barely three miles since December 16. On December 18, Dietrich was harrassed repeatedly by telephone calls from the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief West, urging him to restore the momentum of the 12th SS Panzer Division's advance.

Dietrich finally suggested to SS General Hermann Priess, the commander of the I. SS Panzer Corps, that the 12th SS should disengage itself from the fighting for Krinkelt, swing south, bypassing American units which had moved into Butgenbach, and get back on the main east-west highway. Priess pointed out, however, that it would be impossible to bypass Butgenbach owing to the poor conditions of the secondary roads. It was therefore decided to relieve the 12th SS at Krinkelt and order it south to join the 12th Volksgrenadier Division in attempting to capture the important road junction at Butgenbach.[32]

Even before the 12th SS had officially been ordered to the Butgenbach area, its 26th Regiment had already begun moving in this direction as early as the evening of December 17. The regiment had been sent to take the village of Bullingen in order to protect the northern flank of the more successful advance by the 1st SS Panzer Division. By the evening of December 18, one battalion had already reached Bullingen, after travelling south by way of Losheimergraben. Its pace of travel had been painfully slow, both because of the inexperience of its drivers and because of the road conditions. It was later reported that tracked

vehicles had even churned down to their decks in mud. Nevertheless, this was now the route that the entire 12th SS Panzer Division was expected to take in order to assemble for an assault upon Butgenbach.[33]

A forward command post of the 12th SS was opened at Bullingen on the night of December 18/19. Although the 26th Regiment had not arrived yet, it was decided to launch an attack against the village of Dom Butgenbach on the afternoon of December 19, in cooperation with elements of the 12th Volksgrenadier Division. The urgency of breaking through the American front apparently ruled out the possibility of waiting for the entire 12th SS Panzer Division to assemble. The planned attack proved to be a complete failure. Infantry went forward behind approximately one dozen tanks as they moved slowly down the road toward the village. Some of the tanks became mired down in the mud before even reaching the American lines. The rest were either knocked out by the anti-tank guns of the 26th Regiment/American 1st Infantry Division, which was defending the village, or were crippled by massive support fire from the now sizeable concentration of American artillery at Elsenborn. A second attack was attempted in the evening, with small groups of infantry endeavouring to find the weak points in the American lines, but it was also driven back.[34]

The failure to take Dom Butgenbach on December 19 was only the first of four days of unsuccessful attempts by the 12th SS Panzer Division to capture the small village. The division was never able to become fully assembled for an assault, owing to the fact that its various units were strung out for miles along the now almost impassable road from Krinkelt. On December 20, the remainder of the 26th Regiment finally reached Bullingen, and the entire regiment was launched against Dom Butgenbach during the early morning. However, the assault soon ground to a halt in

the face of American artillery and anti-tank gun fire.[35]

The arrival of the 560th Heavy Tank Destroyer Battalion, as well as German artillery and Nebelwerfer units, allowed the division to launch a more substantial attack against the village on December 21. Yet this assault was also thwarted as the Americans brought down a massive counter-artillery barrage from the Elsenborn ridge. Over 10,000 rounds were fired by American guns in support of the Dom Butgenbach defenders. A few solitary German tanks did manage to make their way into the village before being knocked out by the Americans. Their infantry support had apparently been wiped out by the murderous artillery fire before even being able to reach the American lines.[36]

On December 22, the long-delayed arrival of the 25th Regiment prompted one final assault against Dom Butgenbach. Yet once again, massive American artillery fire from the Elsenborn ridge was able to halt the German advance after inflicting extremely heavy casualties. On the following day, the 12th SS was finally ordered to break off all attacks against the tenaciously-held village.[37]

It was now painfully obvious that the right shoulder of the Sixth Panzer Army could not work itself loose from the Dom Butgenbach-Elsenborn roadblock. On December 24, even Hitler was finally ready to agree to the withdrawal of the 12th SS from the Elsenborn sector, and its commitment further south along the German front. There it would at least be able to relieve the northern flank of the Fifth Panzer Army, which had been able to make considerably more progress during the offensive than had Dietrich's SS armoured divisions.[38]

On December 26, the 12th SS was subordinated to the II. SS Panzer Corps and ordered to an area three miles north-east of Laroche. Here it was to mount an attack with the 9th SS Panzer Division against the

American defences between the Salm and Ourthe Rivers. For the first time since the beginning of the offensive, the onset of cold weather had caused the ground to freeze, and the division's movement was not plagued by mud-clogged roads. Yet its movement was now hampered by fuel shortages, by fighter bomber attacks, and by the fact that roads to its assembly area were clogged by units of the 9th SS Panzer Division. Because of these delays, the 12th SS had only been able to assemble the 25th Regiment by the time its attack was scheduled to go forward.

At midnight on December 27, the Grenadiers of the 25th Regiment began their assault and were able initially to make good progress, despite the thickly-wooded terrain. However, a radio failure caused over half the attackers to become disoriented, and only two companies of the regiment were finally able to find their way through a gap in the American lines. At 2:00 a.m., they took the village of Sadzot by surprise, and were able to hold it until the next day against repeated counter-attacks by elements of the American 75th Infantry Division. Yet with no hope of reinforcements or of armoured support, the two companies were eventually forced to withdraw by the late morning of December 28. It was later learned that the attack by the 9th SS Panzer Division had also been unsuccessful.[39]

The attempts of the 9th SS and 12th SS Panzer Divisions to penetrate the American front on August 27 and 28, were the last serious bid by the Sixth Panzer Army to carry out an offensive role. On August 28, Field Marshal Model, the commander of Army Group B, ordered Dietrich to switch over to the defensive, and at the same time began to strip the Sixth Panzer Army of its armour.[40] On December 31, the 12th SS was again subordinated to the I. SS Panzer Corps, which in turn was transferred to the Fifth Panzer Army. The 12th SS was now ordered to move immediately

to the area north-west of the besieged town of Bastogne. There it was to join in the attempts to destroy the corridor to the town which had been created by General George Patton's Third American Army.[41]

From January 1 to January 5, the 12th SS participated in several unsuccessful attempts to cut through Patton's corridor. Yet little could be expected of the division in light of the fact that its battle strength had already been reduced by three-quarters. On January 5, the Fifth Panzer Army finally halted all operations against Bastogne, and the 12th SS was returned to the Sixth Panzer Army. Three days later, the abandonment of the entire offensive was formalized by Hitler when he ordered the Sixth Panzer Army to be withdrawn from the front for use as an operational reserve.[42]

The performance of the 12th SS Panzer Division during the Ardennes offensive stands in stark contrast to its amazing accomplishments during the Normandy campaign. For six days, the division had hammered fruitlessly against the American defences at Krinkelt and Dom Butgenbach. Its failure to obtain a quick and decisive breakthrough had eventually doomed all chances of success for the Sixth Panzer Army's planned advance to the Meuse.

To a certain extent, the poor performance of the 12th SS can be attributed to the unfavourable topography of the Ardennes. In the deep snows and wooded country, the division's advance was confined to the existing road network. The poor conditions of these roads not only slowed the movement of the 12th SS considerably, but they also prevented it from fully assembling its forces for a concentrated attack.

Yet perhaps a more important explanation for the division's lack of success can be found in the inexperience and lack of training of both its officers and men. The division bore little resemblance to the elite

armoured formation which had gone into action in Normandy. Its ranks were no longer filled with young, indoctrinated boys from the Hitler Youth, who had received almost ten months of intense training under the guidance of veteran Waffen-SS officers. Instead, it had been composed mostly of conscripts, who had received barely two months of instruction, under the leadership of inexperienced officers and NCOs. The division was simply no longer of a high enough calibre to achieve success against the better-trained and better-equipped American forces in the Ardennes.

The 12th SS was given little time to reflect upon its failures during the Ardennes offensive. On January 20, 1945, Hitler ordered that Dietrich's command, now officially redesignated as the Sixth SS Panzer Army, be sent immediately to Hungary. The chief of the general staff, General Heinz Guderian, had hoped that Dietrich's forces would be transferred to the area east of Berlin, where the Soviet winter offensive had already pushed to a point forty miles east of the Reich capital. However, Hitler insisted upon employing the Sixth SS Panzer Army in Hungary in order to help defend the important oil fields south-west of Lake Balaton. Hitler also believed that a German offensive in Hungary, where the Soviets would least expect it, might help to bring about a decisive change along the entire eastern front.[43]

The movement of Dietrich's army from west to east was only carried out with great difficulty. The withdrawal of the SS armoured divisions from the Ardennes to rail embarkation points in Germany was plagued by fuel shortages, heavy snows and allied fighter bomber attacks. The 12th SS Panzer Division was only able to reach its embarkation stations west of Cologne between February 2 and 6. Here it was loaded onto trains at night, amidst considerable confusion. The trains themselves were in poor condition, with up to one-third of the cars being unuseable, and

with tanks and trucks often breaking through the car beds. Added to this was the fact that the rail lines across Germany were repeatedly disrupted by allied bombings, causing frequent delays and changes in the army's planned route of travel. As a result, it was not until February 16, that the 12th SS was finally able to reach its assembly area in Hungary, north of the town of Komarno.[44]

The division was given no time whatsoever to be refitted. Although it did receive some new equipment and vehicles, its replacements in personnel did not come close to compensating for its losses in the Ardennes. Those men that the division did receive consisted, once again, of wounded veterans, and members of the Navy or Air Force who had received no training in land warfare. These replacements had simply been handed over to the 12th SS at Cologne when it had embarked on trains for Hungary, and were only actually incorporated into the division after it had reached the eastern front.[45]

The I. SS Panzer Corps was the first component of the Sixth SS Panzer Army to arrive in Hungary, where it came under the command of General Otto Woehler's Army Group South. Woehler was able to secure Hitler's permission to include the corps in a limited offensive operation against the Soviet bridgehead over the Hron River near Esztergom. In a sense, this would prove to be the last successful offensive in which the 12th SS Panzer Division participated. The attack was launched on February 17, with I. SS Panzer Corps committing the entire 12th SS Panzer Division and the Leibstandarte's panzer regiment. The Germans were able to achieve a complete surprise, and by February 25, the bridgehead over the Hron had been eliminated. To a certain extent, this success was due to the fact that Soviet armour on that sector had been withdrawn for refitting. Yet the Soviets had still offered fierce resistance, and the

12th SS had suffered a high number of casualties, especially among its officers. One of those killed was SS Lt.-Colonel Bernhard Krause, the commander of the 25th Regiment, who had been with the division since it was first formed in 1943. I. SS Panzer Corps as a whole lost over 3,000 men in the operation and was left with only 42 operational tanks by the end of February.[46]

Yet the elimination of the Hron bridgehead was but the prelude to a major German offensive in Hungary. On February 25, Hitler announced his intention to launch operation "Spring Awakening" against Marshal Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front, west of the Danube. "Spring Awakening" was intended to create a more substantial barrier between the Soviets and the Nagykanisza oil fields. The major role in the offensive was given to the Sixth SS Panzer Army, which was to drive south from the region between Lake Balaton and Lake Valencze, and reach the Danube at Baja. Hitler reasoned that an attack in this region would achieve complete surprise, and therefore offered the best opportunity for quick gains. He apparently ignored the warnings of Hungarians, who pointed out that the terrain in this region was boggy and completely unsuited for armoured Operations. This proved to be a fateful oversight when temperatures suddenly began to rise at the end of February, transforming the planned route of the attack into a sea of mud.[47]

The 12th SS Panzer Division was moved south to the region between Lake Balaton and Lake Valencze between February 25 and March 3.[48] From here, the offensive was finally launched early on the morning of March 6. With no prior artillery barrage, the I. SS Panzer Corps struck south, with the 12th SS on the left and the 1st SS on the right. Tanks and heavy weapons soon proved to be practically useless owing to the marshy terrain and deplorable conditions of the roads. As Sepp Dietrich later

pointed out: "The roads were completely unuseable for the heavy tanks. The King Tiger, weighing 67 tons, sank up to the edge of its armour in the mud. Their use was out of the question."[49] The attack became transformed primarily into an infantry assault, which was only able to make slow progress against stiff Soviet resistance. The Soviets had not been surprised by the German offensive, and Marshal Tolbukhin had even been aware of the date of the German attack. Consequently, the 12th SS found itself forced to break through a well-prepared system of defences, position by position, with a correspondingly high number of casualties. By the evening of March 6, the division had only been able to advance a disappointing one to two miles.[50]

The succeeding days of the offensive were characterized by renewed heavy fighting. Yet by March 11, Leibstandarte and the 12th SS had still been able to advance 20 miles to the Sio Canal. Here the Soviets had reinforced their positions considerably with a Cossack cavalry corps and a self-propelled gun brigade. Nevertheless, by late evening, the I. Battalion/26th Regiment was able to establish a bridgehead over the canal at Simontornya, which it held against repeated Soviet counter-attacks for the next three days.[51]

The bridgehead over the Sio Canal proved to be the furthest extent of the 12th SS Panzer Division's advance during operation "Spring Awakening". After over a week of bitter fighting, the 12th SS, and Sixth SS Panzer Army as a whole, now found themselves to be finished materially. The mud and impenetrable terrain, coupled with the tenacious Soviet resistance, had exhausted the SS divisions' supply of reserves and equipment. When it reached the Sio Canal, Dietrich's army was left with only 185 of its original 595 tanks and self-propelled guns, and it was unable to secure an adequate supply of fuel, ammunition or spare parts.

The complete exhaustion of his forces prompted Dietrich to recommend to Army Group South that the Sixth SS Panzer Army switch over to the defensive, and that the entire offensive be considered a failure.[52]

The Soviets soon gave Army Group South no other choice but to halt the offensive. On March 16, the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts launched their own offensive, attacking west against the German front between Lake Valencze and Bicske. Their offensive was intended to trap the Sixth SS Panzer Army east of Lake Balaton, and then to drive northwest toward Vienna. General Woehler at first did not recognize the seriousness of the Soviet threat, and on March 17 simply ordered Dietrich's army to halt its operations along the Sio Canal and regroup near Stuhlweissenburg (Szekesfehervar) for a counter-attack. However, the Soviets were able to rip open the German front during the first two days of their attack, and it soon became clear that the Sixth SS Panzer Army was in danger of being cut off completely.

Dietrich's forces were only able to withdraw from the developing encirclement by retracing their attack route between Lake Valencze and Lake Balaton. In their hurried attempt to escape, the SS divisions lost countless vehicles in the mud, and were forced to leave behind broken-down tanks and assault guns.[53] Many SS Grenadiers were also affected by the demoralization and sense of hopelessness which had now become rife among the men of Army Group South. The commander of the Sixth Panzer Army, General Balck, reported having encountered entire SS units -- including the trench mortar detachment of the 12th SS Panzer Division -- which had fled to the rear without having fired a shot. Hitler was enraged and disappointed when he hear of such cowardice on the part of his Waffen-SS troops. He promptly ordered all members of the 1st SS, 2nd SS, 9th SS, and 12th SS Panzer Divisions to tear the prized cuff bands, bearing their

unit's name, from the sleeves of their uniforms. He also despatched Heinrich Himmler to Hungary to take all necessary measures to help restore the battle morale of Dietrich's SS armoured formations. Upon his arrival, Himmler established guard battalions on the western boundaries of Hungary, which were ordered to shoot on the spot any SS men who endeavoured to disengage from the enemy without their weapons.[54]

That the legendary "spirit" of the Waffen-SS was starting to weaken was a reflection of the fact that the entire German position in Hungary was beginning to crumble. On March 18, Leibstandarte and the 12th SS finally endeavoured to form a front on the edge of the Bakony forest, west of Varpolata. However, despite Hitler's demands for a counter-attack, the entire Sixth SS Panzer Army was forced to withdraw westward to the Raab River on March 24 and 25. Even here, a coherent front could not be formed, owing to the fact that the Soviet Sixth Guards Tank Army was able to drive through an almost ten-mile gap between the Sixth Panzer and Sixth SS Panzer Armies, and reach the border of Austria on March 31. Only then did Hitler finally agree to a gradual withdrawal of the Sixth SS Panzer Army to the Austrian border defences.[55]

Dietrich was now faced by appalling shortages of manpower, fuel, and equipment, in addition to the moral and physical exhaustion of his troops. By the first week in April, the strength of the Sixth SS Panzer Army was below that of a single armoured division. The 12th SS Panzer Division alone had been reduced to fewer than 455 officers and men, and only one remaining tank.[56] The 25th Regiment was left with only 60 men, of whom a sizeable number were support troops who had been pressed into front-line duty.[57] Yet like other "divisions" of Army Group South, the 12th SS was still expected to fulfill divisional responsibilities and hold a divisional front. This meant that it could not man a continuous line,

but instead could only hold a series of strongpoints which were repeatedly outflanked or surrounded by the Soviet advance.[58] Under such circumstances, it was impossible for the 12th SS Panzer Division, or the Sixth SS Panzer Army, to hold the borders of Austria.

By April 3, Dietrich and the remnants of his army had been forced to fall back to the region around Vienna. When asked how many tanks he had to defend the city with, Dietrich is said to have responded bitterly, "We are called the Sixth SS Panzer Army because we have only six panzers."[59] Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, Dietrich withdrew his army from Vienna several days later, and the city was taken by the Soviets on April 13.[60]

The Soviets relaxed their pressure on the Austrian front during the second half of April and shifted the main weight of their offensive north of the Danube. This allowed Army Group South to withdraw most of its SS armoured divisions from the line for use as a small strategic reserve. Yet such moves could not alter the fact that the end of the war was fast approaching for the German forces in south-east Europe. By the last week in April, the American Third Army was able to reach the western borders of Austria at Passau and Salzburg. Army Group South now found itself caught between the Americans in the west and the Soviets in the east. With no hope of escape, orders were issued on May 7 calling for all troops to disengage themselves from the eastern front under the cover of darkness, and to withdraw westward to surrender (for obvious reasons) to the Americans.[61]

Hubert Meyer claims that on May 8, the remnants of the 12th SS Panzer Division marched past Hugo Kraas for the last time, less than a mile from the American lines. Ignoring the "demeaning" American order to drape their vehicles with white flags, the men "remained proud and erect" as they then drove into captivity near the Austrian town of Steyr.[62]

NOTES - CHAPTER III

1 Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmacht-führungsstab), 1940-1945, 5 vols., eds. Percy Ernst Schramm et. al. (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1961-1963), 4: 345; James J. Weingartner, Hitler's Guard: The Story of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945 (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 118.

2 Hubert Meyer, "Der Einsatz der 12. SS Panzerdivision vom Invasionsende bis zum Kriegsschluss," in Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere (Munich: Schild-Verlag, 1957), p. 334; Rudolf Lehmann, "I. SS Panzer Corps (Oct. 15 - Dec. 16, 1944)," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. B-577 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 1 (hereafter cited as: Lehmann, NAMS, B-577); Fritz Kraemer, "Operations of the Sixth Panzer Army (1944-1945)," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. A-924 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 5 (hereafter cited as: Kraemer, NAMS, A-924).

3 Fritz Kraemer, "I. SS Panzer Corps in the West in 1944," National Archives Foreign Military Studies, Manuscript No. C-048 (Washington: The National Archives), p. a; Hubert Meyer, p. 334. Surprisingly, in his account of the events of this period, Fritz Kraemer never mentions that he was commander of the 12th SS. It is Hubert Meyer who states that Kraemer was given temporary command of the division.

4 Lehmann, NAMS, B-577, p. 1.

5 Gerhard Rempel, "The Misguided Generation: Hitler Youth and SS, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971), p. 698.

6 Hubert Meyer, p. 334; "An Interview with Genmaj. (Waffen-SS) Fritz Kraemer, 14-15 August, 1945," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies, Manuscript No. ETHINT 21 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 3 (Hereafter cited as NAMS, ETHINT 21); "An Interview with Obstgrf. 'Sepp' Dietrich," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies, Manuscript No. ETHINT 15 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 1 (Hereafter cited as: NAMS, ETHINT 15); Hugh M. Cole, United States Army In World War II; The European Theatre of Operations; The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1965), p. 77. Kraemer claims that the 12th SS and 9th SS Panzer Divisions were given more replacements from the Air Force and Navy than were the 1st SS and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions.

7 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 121; Lehmann, NAMS, B-577, p. 2; Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, p. 5.

8 Hubert Meyer, p. 334; Lehmann, NAMS, B-577, p. 2; NAMS, ETHINT 15, p. 16.

9 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, p. 58.

10 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, pp. 120-121.

11 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, pp. 6-7; Lehmann, NAMS, B-577, p. 3. It is not certain whether this move was really motivated by concern for the Cologne sector, or whether it was just a camouflaged preparatory move for the Ardennes offensive.

12 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, p. 8; James Lucas and Matthew Cooper, Hitler's Elite: Leibstandarte SS, 1933-45 (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975), pp. 151-152.

13 Jacques Nobecourt, Hitler's Last Gamble, The Battle of the Ardennes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 107.

14 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 121; Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, enclosure 2, p. 3; Rudolf Lehmann, "I. SS Panzer Corps (Dec. 15, 1944 - Jan. 25, 1945)," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. B-779 (Washington: The National Archives), p. 13 (hereafter cited as: Lehmann, NAMS, B-779).

15 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 1-2, pp. 16-17.

16 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 122.

17 Hitler's Directive of November 10, 1944, cited in Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 122.

18 Cole, The Ardennes, p. 10.

19 Ibid., p. 76; Milton Shulman, Defeat in the West (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947), p. 225. That Hitler intended Dietrich's command to be an SS army is revealed in a letter of November 1, 1944, in which Hitler mistakenly calls it the Sixth SS Panzer Army. See Cole, The Ardennes, p. 34. John Toland contends that Hitler had faith in Dietrich, not so much in the army's SS formations. However, the fact that Toland repeatedly calls Dietrich "butcher boy" (because Dietrich had once been a butcher's apprentice) leads one to question Toland's objectivity. See John Toland, Battle: The Story of the Bulge (Scarborough, Ont.: The New American Library of Canada, 1959), p. 28.

20 Volksgrenadier divisions (People's Grenadier divisions) were first formed in September 1944. They were usually built from the remains of burnt-out infantry formations, and were re-named Volksgrenadier divisions for propaganda and morale purposes. They were organized as infantry divisions, but with reduced manpower and increased automatic firepower. Most received very little training before going into battle. See W. K. Davis, German Army Handbook (New York: Arco Publishing Co., 1974), p. 46.

21 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, p. 8, pp. 16-17; enclosure 1, p. 1.

22 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 28-32, 77; Nobecourt, Hitler's Last Gamble, pp. 108-112.

23 "An Interview with Obstgrf. 'Sepp' Dietrich, 10 July 1945," U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection, Manuscript No. ETHINT 16 (Washington: The National Archives), pp. 2-3 (Hereafter cited as: NAMS, ETHINT 16). Dietrich would later claim that the Ardennes offensive had been "the worst prepared German offensive of this war."

24 Lehmann, NAMS, B-577, p. 5.

25 Ibid., p. 10; Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, p. 25.

26 NAMS, ETHINT 15, p. 1; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 121.

27 Cited in Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 581.

28 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, pp. 16-17; Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 8; Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 91-96.

29 Rudolf Lehmann claims that concern as to whether the Volksgrenadier division would be able to punch through the American lines had caused the 12th SS to have one of its own battalions in readiness behind the 277th in case it required assistance. See NAMS, B-779, p. 4.

30 Hubert Meyer, p. 336; NAMS, ETHINT 21, pp. 10-11; Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 20.

31 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 99-115; Hubert Meyer, p. 136; Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 24.

32 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 115-116, 125.

33 Ibid., pp. 120-121.

34 Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 24.

35 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 129-130; Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 29. The Americans had been quick to use German delays to increase the number of artillery pieces around Elsenborn. On December 16, the Americans had had only 200 pieces in the Ardennes, but by December 23, this had been increased to 1,200, most of which were situated near Elsenborn. See Nobecourt, Hitler's Last Gamble, p. 153; Danny S. Parker, Battles for the Ardennes (New York: Simulations Publications Inc., 1978), p. 12.

36 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 130-131.

37 Ibid., pp. 131-132; Hubert Meyer, p. 336. An American patrol found 300 dead Germans in the woods outside the village, who had been killed by artillery. They had apparently been intended to support the attacking tanks.

38 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 131-133; Hubert Meyer, pp. 336-337.

39 Hubert Meyer, p. 337; Nobecourt, Hitler's Last Gamble, p. 242.

40 Cole, The Ardennes, pp. 601-603; Hubert Meyer, p. 337.

41 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 131; Cole, The Ardennes, p. 603.

42 Lehmann, NAMS, B-779, p. 40; Hubert Meyer, p. 337; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 131.

43 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 131.

44 Peter Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, 1944/1945 (Vienna, Munich/Zurich: Verlag Fritz Molden, 1969), pp. 214-216; Erich Kern, Die letzte Schlacht, Ungarn: 1944-1945 (Göttingen: Verlag K.W. Schütz, 1960), p. 243. The importance of oil in Hitler's decision to send the Sixth SS Panzer Army to Hungary is shown by his remark to Guderian that: "If you do not obtain more fuel, your tanks can no longer move and your pilots can no longer start their planes. . . . But my generals understand nothing about war economics." Cited in Gosztony, p. 215.

45 Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 134; Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East, Army Historical Series (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1968), p. 439; Hubert Meyer, p. 338.

46 Kraemer, NAMS, A-924, pp. 56-57; NAMS, ETHINT 15, p. 22; Hubert Meyer, p. 338.

47 Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 448-449; Hubert Meyer, pp. 338-339; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 134; Lucas and Cooper, Hitler's Elite, pp. 143-144.

48 Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, p. 450; Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, p. 217, 223.

49 The Sixth SS Panzer Army was camouflaged as being composed of training units and construction staffs, in the hope that this would contribute to the surprise of the offensive. However, the Hron bridgehead operation had already made the Soviets aware of the army's presence. See Kern, Die letzte Schlacht, pp. 242-243; Paul Hausser, Waffen-SS im Einsatz (Gottingen: Plesse Verlag, 1953), p. 203.

50 Cited in Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, p. 226.

51 Ibid., pp. 223-226; Kern, Die letzte Schlacht, p. 289; Hubert Meyer, p. 340.

52 Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, pp. 226-227; Hubert Meyer, p. 340.

53 Lucas and Cooper, Hitler's Elite, p. 143; Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, p. 230.

54 Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 452-453; Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, pp. 231-238.

55 Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, pp. 242-243; Weingartner, Hitler's Guard, p. 136; Hubert Meyer, pp. 341-342. Sepp Dietrich is said to have refused to convey the order to the men of the four SS panzer divisions. Ironically, their cuffbands had already been removed as one of the measures taken to camouflage the identity of the Sixth SS Panzer Army prior to operation "Spring Awakening". Hubert Meyer claims that Hitler withdrew his order after Dietrich had informed him how most men in the Waffen-SS had performed commendably during the withdrawal.

56 Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 453-455; Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, pp. 243-244.

57 K.G. Klietmann, Die Waffen-SS: Eine Dokumentation (Osnabrück: Verlag 'der Freiwillige', 1965), p. 55. This made the 12th SS the weakest division in the Sixth SS Panzer Army. Although no explanation has been offered for this, it was perhaps a result of the fact that the 12th SS had played the leading role in the costly Hron bridgehead operation.

58 Hubert Meyer, p. 341.

59 Lucas and Cooper, Hitler's Elite, p. 146.

60 Cited in Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, p. 257.

61 Ibid.; Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, p. 456.

62 Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, p. 456; Gosztony, Endkampf an der Donau, pp. 267-273.

63 Hubert Meyer, p. 341.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" was in many ways an unprecedented occurrence. Never before had a nation deliberately set out to organize an entire division composed of teenaged soldiers. To be sure, adult societies had used children in many military conflicts throughout history. In Nazi Germany itself, numerous Hitler Youths had served in Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS divisions since the outbreak of the Second World War. Yet the creation of the 12th SS Panzer Division was the first time that a whole division of such adolescents had been trained and equipped to fight as an elite combat unit.[1] The formation of the division, and its commitment on crucial sectors of the front, was a tragic example of the misuse and exploitation of Germany's youth under National Socialist rule. Only the twisted morality of the Third Reich could regard such teenaged soldiers as being too young to smoke, yet old enough to die in battle.

The 12th SS Panzer Division earned a well-deserved reputation as a formidable fighting unit during the Normandy campaign. Its fierce and almost suicidal resistance near the city of Caen helped to frustrate allied hopes of a quick and decisive victory in the West. Its defensive tenacity also led ultimately to its virtual annihilation -- only a handful of survivors remained of the division after three months of heavy fighting.

The amazing performance of the Hitler Youth Division in Normandy can be explained, in part, by the fact that it was one of the better-equipped and better-trained German units in the West. The interest shown in the division by Heinrich Himmler, by the Reich Youth Leadership, and by Adolf Hitler himself, had ensured that its armament and manpower were both above average, even by German standards. In addition, the division

had received almost ten months of intense, practical training under the guidance of veteran Waffen-SS officers. The resulting military skill and ability was recognized even by its Canadian opponents, who admitted that "the Germans [the 12th SS Panzer Division] contrived to get more out of their training than we did."[2]

A more significant factor behind the division's combat performance in Normandy can be traced to the composition of its troops. The 12th SS was formed primarily from seventeen and eighteen year old members of the Hitler Youth. Their youthful enthusiasm and eagerness for combat most certainly contributed to the division's accomplishments during the summer of 1944. Moreover, as members of the Hitler Youth, and then as Waffen-SS soldiers, these boys had been subjected to large amounts of indoctrination. While this did not transform the division into a formation of fanatical Nazis, it did undoubtedly affect the outlook of the impressionable teen-agers. Its stress upon activism and violence, and its glorification of war would serve to reinforce the ruthless and aggressive type of combat performance which came to characterize the division.

Yet perhaps the most important factor which helps to explain the combat record of the 12th SS Panzer Division in Normandy is the fact that the division was led by an experienced cadre of energetic, young officers who brought to the division the same reckless, freebooter spirit which permeated other crack formations of the Waffen-SS:

> Harsh, ruthless, and often arrogant, these officers nevertheless established a close personal relationship with their men. . . . Espousing a particularly demanding brand of "follow me" leadership, the young SS officers -- even those of high rank -- were often in the van of the attack. Just as they readily risked their own lives and those of their men, they killed without compunction and rarely discouraged their men from committing excesses. Sometimes loved by their men, other times hated, often respected but always obeyed, this elite within an elite left their mark on the Waffen SS.[3]

It was the charismatic, swashbuckling style of leadership of young SS officers such as Kurt Meyer, which was able to foster a unique esprit de corps within the 12th SS and inspire its young Grenadiers to feats of incredible bravery and daring on the battlefields of France.[4]

By comparison, the combat record of the 12th SS Panzer Division in the Ardennes and Hungary was both disappointing and anti-climactic. During the Ardennes offensive, the division carried out repeated, yet fruitless attempts to crack the American lines. Its failure to achieve a breakthrough contributed significantly to the failure of the entire German offensive. In Hungary, the shattered remnants of the 12th SS enjoyed a few limited successes during the Hron bridgehead operation and the Lake Balaton offensive. Yet the division also revealed considerable weaknesses in both its morale and spirit during the Soviet counter-offensive of March and April, 1945.

An explanation for this contrast with the division's earlier performance can be found in the fact that the 12th SS was but the shadow of its former self after the summer of 1944. The division had suffered enormous losses among its original cadre of men and officers during the fighting in Normandy. The patched-up formation which was sent to the Ardennes and Hungary was no longer composed primarily of enthusiastic youngsters from the Hitler Youth, led by veteran SS officers. Instead, its ranks were now filled mostly with poorly-trained recruits, often from the Navy or Air Force, who were commanded by inexperienced officers and NCOs. The Hitler Youth Division did indeed continue to exist after the Normandy campaign, but in name only.

The lack of documentary evidence does not permit a more detailed assessment of the 12th SS Panzer Division's combat record. However, available information does allow at least one last tentative remark

concerning the division's overall performance. The 12th SS distinguished itself in Normandy not by its offensive successes, but by its defensive victories. It was not its tactical skill, but its ability to retain its fierce fighting spirit against seemingly hopeless odds, which had established its military reputation. Such defensive tenacity had also founded the reputation of other crack formations of the Waffen-SS. It was not as an elite assault force, but as an emergency "fire brigade", shoring up critical sectors of the German front, that the Waffen-SS had won Hitler's admiration.

With this in mind, the disappointing record of the 12th SS Panzer Division in the Ardennes can perhaps be better understood. The division's lack of success during the offensive was shared by the other SS armoured formations of the Sixth Panzer Army. Despite their superior equipment, they were unable to match the initial gains made by the regular Wehrmacht units of the Fifth Panzer Army. One is left with the impression that while Waffen-SS divisions proved themselves to be elite formations during defensive campaigns, they could not perform as outstandingly during offensive operations. One can therefore only speculate to what extent the 12th SS Panzer Division's failure in the Ardennes was a result of poor terrain or the low calibre of its recruits, and to what extent it was a result of the division being forced to assume an offensive role for which it was simply not suited.

The history of the 12th SS Panzer Division can be used to place many of the issues and controversies which have come to surround the Waffen-SS in a new perspective. Thus, charges by former officers of the regular Army that Waffen-SS units were poorly-trained and poorly-led, would appear to be refuted by the outstanding record of the 12th SS, at least in Normandy. One can also question their claims that SS units were

less obedient to the orders of regular Army officers, or that they could never be entirely assimilated under Army commands.[5] Not only did the Hitler Youth Division show no signs of friction or disobedience in its dealings with its Army superiors, but it was actually commanded for a short time by Fritz Kraemer, a former staff officer in the Wehrmacht.

By the same token, neither can Waffen-SS apologists claim that their combat units were somehow independent and distinct from the SS as a whole. The very creation of the 12th SS Panzer Division was a direct result of the keen interest shown by Heinrich Himmler, and his SS recruiting chief, Gottlob Berger, in the idea of a military unit composed entirely of Hitler Youths. The continued importance of SS ideology within the 12th SS Panzer Division would also suggest that the division's links with its parent organization were never entirely severed. Racial and political indoctrination was never an integral part of training within the regular Army as it was within the Waffen-SS.

Indeed, a study of the 12th SS Panzer Division leads one to question the claim by Waffen-SS apologists that they were "soldiers like any others". The division's murder of Canadian prisoners in Normandy stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of Army units during the same campaign. The ruthless manner in which SS troops carried out their tasks as "battle police" to stiffen the resistance of Wehrmacht formations, would also suggest that they were a breed apart from soldiers of the regular Army. If one searches for a way to describe the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend", then one must say that it was a crack military formation, but one which possessed a reckless and aggressive spirit, recognizing few moral limitations. It was this ethos which distinguished it from units of the Wehrmacht, yet which also helped to forge it into one of the foremost German armoured units of the Second World War.

The post-war fate of soldiers of the 12th SS Panzer Division was fraught with humiliation, harrassment, and in some cases imprisonment. Like other members of the Waffen-SS, they were judged by the Nuremberg Tribunal as having been part of a criminal organization. They were denied the same pensions and benefits that were eventually granted to former members of the Wehrmacht by the Federal German Government. Officers and NCOs were kept in prison camps by the Western allies for as long as four years after the war. They were then brought before de-Nazification courts where some were deprived of their civil rights.[6]

The most serious problems and difficulties during the post-war years were reserved for Kurt Meyer.[7] After his capture, Meyer was brought before a Canadian military court and sentenced to death in December 1945 for his alleged collusion in the murder of allied prisoners in Normandy. He thereby became the first German war criminal to be sentenced to death by the Western allies. Meyer's sentence was eventually commuted to life imprisonment, and after almost nine years in allied prisons (including a penitentiary in New Brunswick), he was released from captivity in September 1954. Meyer subsequently became an active member of the Mutual Aid Society of the Waffen-SS (HIAG) in its campaigns to rehabilitate the reputation and image of the Waffen-SS. In December 1961, he died suddenly (and somewhat incongruously) of a heart attack at the age of fifty-one.[8]

NOTES - CONCLUSION

1 Gerhard Rempel, "The Misguided Generation: Hitler Youth and SS, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971), pp. 731-732.

2 Charles P. Stacey, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, vol. 3: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945 (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), p. 277.

3 George H. Stein, The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 292.

4 An American sociological study of the German Army during World War Two also concludes that the personalities of commanding officers was a major factor behind the stubborn resistance shown by many German troops. It claims that the fighting effectiveness of most soldiers was not dependent upon their political values, but instead was determined by the composition of their primary group. If the primary group contained a "hard core" of energetic and zealous officers and men, then the military effectiveness and stability of the group was increased immensely. Such a "hard core" provided weaker men with models with which to identify, while at the same time checking divisive tendencies and defeatism in the group. See Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," Public Opinion Quarterly 12 (1948): pp. 280-315.

5 See, for example, Siegfried Westphal, The German Army in the West (London: Cassell, 1951).

6 Stein, The Waffen-SS, pp. 250-256.

7 In James Lucas and Matthew Cooper, Hitler's Elite: Leibstandarte SS, 1933-1945 (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975), p. 152, it is claimed that the last commander of the division, Hugo Kraas, disappeared without a trace in 1945. However, the fact that in 1947, Kraas wrote one of the manuscripts for the U.S. National Archives Foreign Military Studies Collection (Manuscript B-522, "The 12th SS Panzer Division, Nov. 15 - Dec. 15, 1944) would appear to refute this claim.

8 Lucas and Cooper, Hitler's Elite, p. 153; Stein, The Waffen-SS, pp. 254, 278; Kurt Meyer, Grenadiere (Munich: Schild Verlag, 1957), pp. 358ff; B. J. S. MacDonald, The Trial of Kurt Meyer (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1954), passim.

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APPENDIX I.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE
12TH SS PANZER DIVISION "HITLERJUGEND", JUNE 1944*

Commander: SS Brigadier Fritz Witt (after June 14, SS-Colonel Kurt Meyer)
Ia Officer: SS Major Hubert Meyer

12th SS Panzer Regiment
SS Colonel Max Wünsche

I. Battalion: SS Major Arnold Jürgensen
II. Battalion: SS Major Karl Heinz Prinz

25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment
SS Colonel Kurt Meyer (after June 14, SS Lt.-Col. Hans Milius)
I. Battalion: SS Major Waldmüller
II. Battalion: SS Major Scappini
III. Battalion: SS Lt.-Col. Milius (after June 14, SS Captain Steeger)

26th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment
SS Lt.-Colonel Wilhelm Mohnke
I. Battalion: SS Lt.-Col. Bernhard Krause
II. Battalion: SS Lt.-Col. Bernhard Siebken
III. Battalion: SS Major Erich Olboetter

12th SS Panzer Artillery Regiment
SS Lt.-Colonel Schröder
I. Battalion: SS Major Urbanitz
II. Battalion: SS Major Schöps
III. Battalion: SS Major Bartling

12th SS Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion
SS Major Gerd Bremer

12th SS Panzer Engineer Battalion
SS Major Siegfried Müller

12th SS Tank Destroyer Battalion (still being formed)
SS Major Hanreich

12th SS Panzer Anti-Aircraft Battalion
SS Major Fendt

12th SS Werfer Battalion (still being formed)
SS Major W. Müller

12th SS Panzer Signals Battalion
SS Major Pandel

12th SS Administrative Battalion

12th SS Medical Battalion

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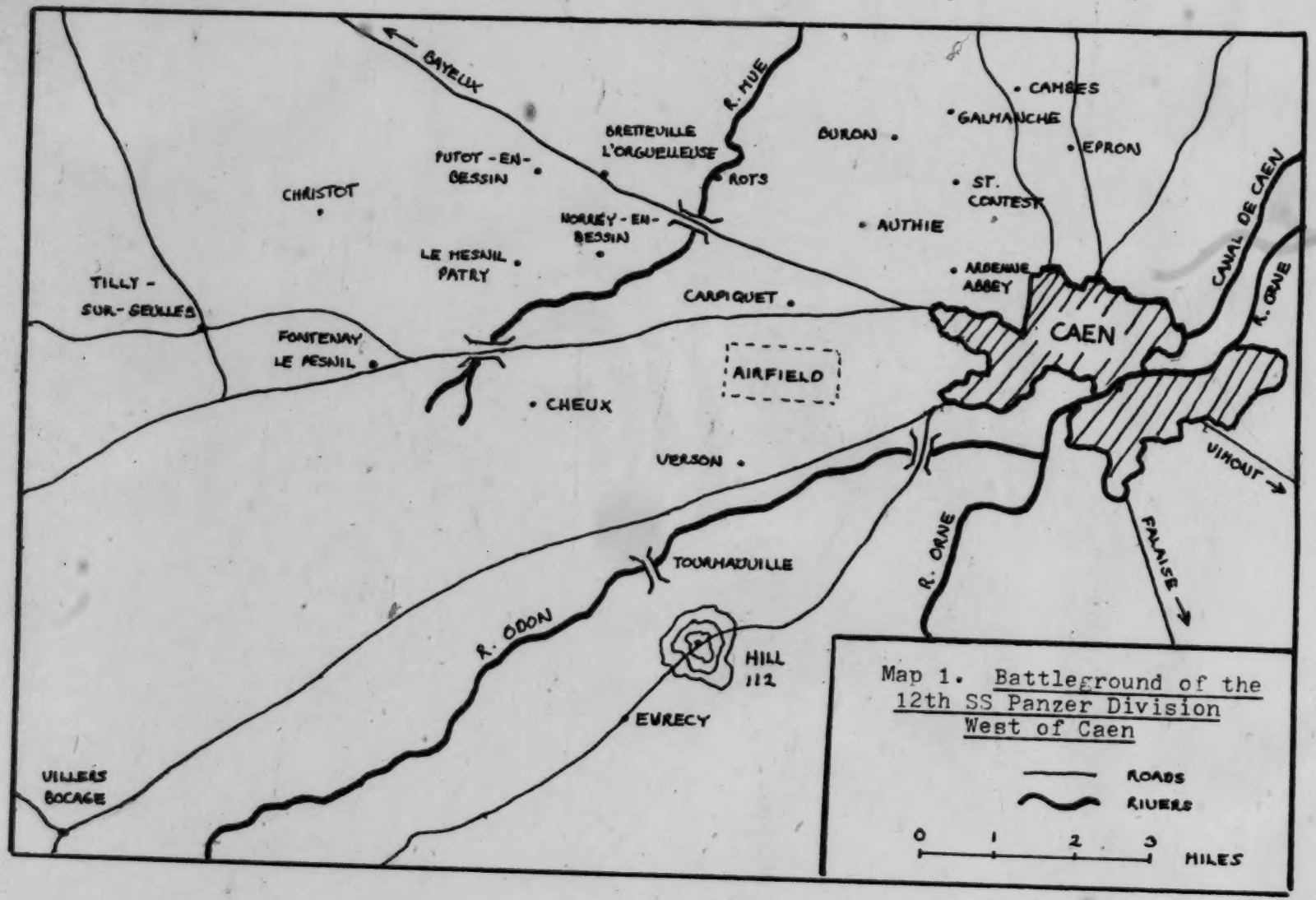
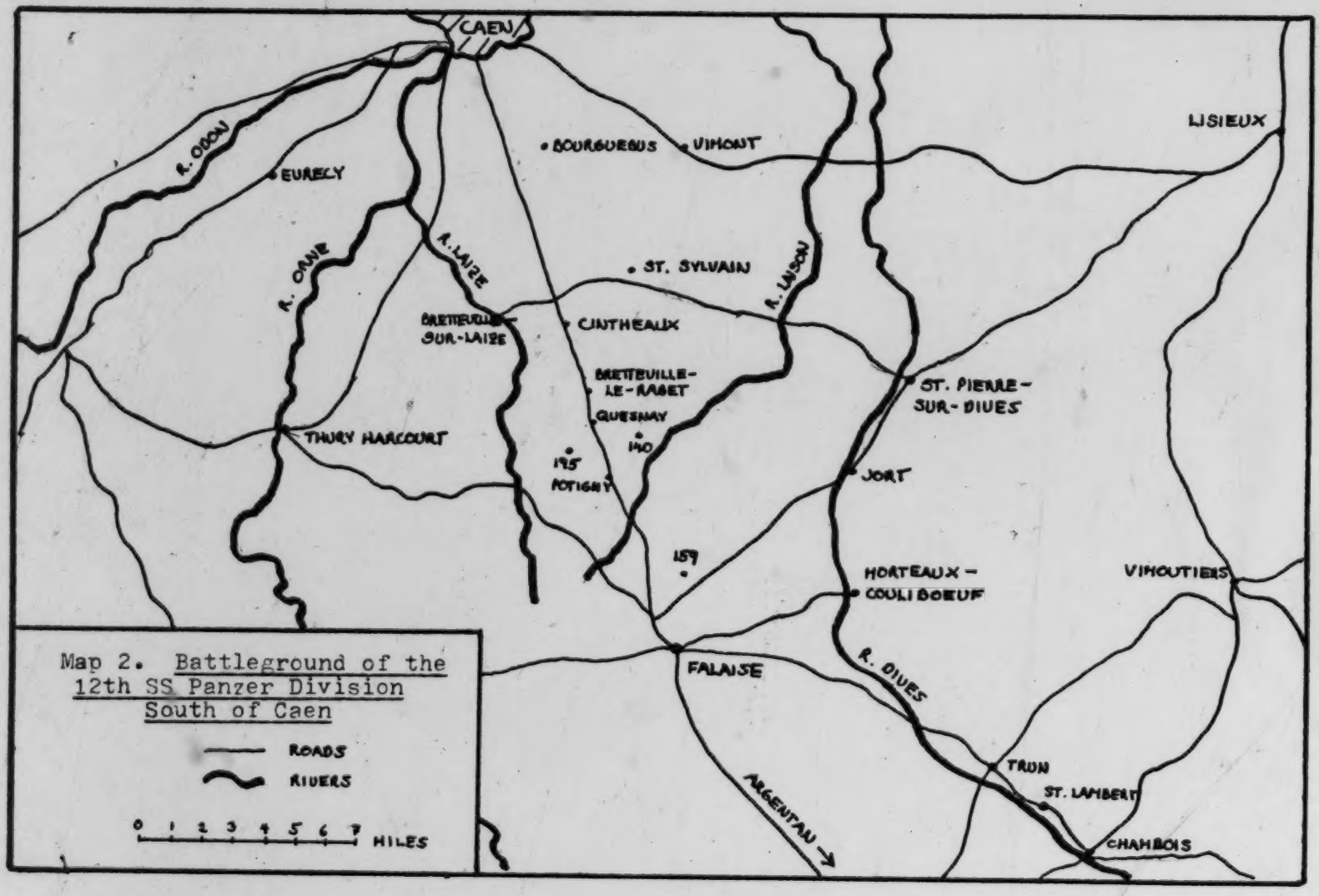
* Source: SS Lt.-Col. Hubert Meyer's Narrative of the 12th SS Panzer Division, Manuscript No. P-164 (Ottawa: Office of the Chief of Military History), pp. 80-81.

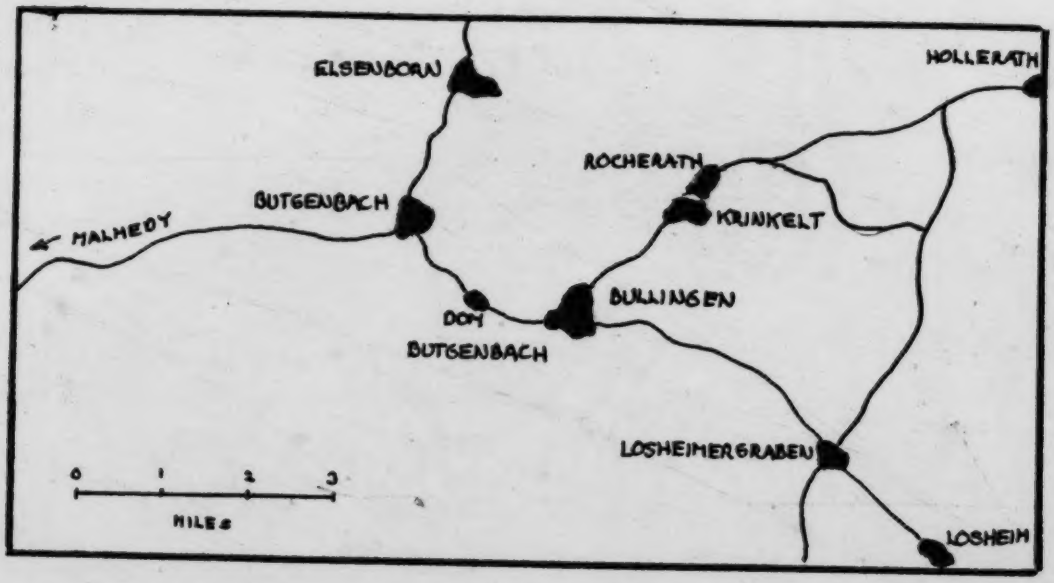
APPENDIX 2. MAPS



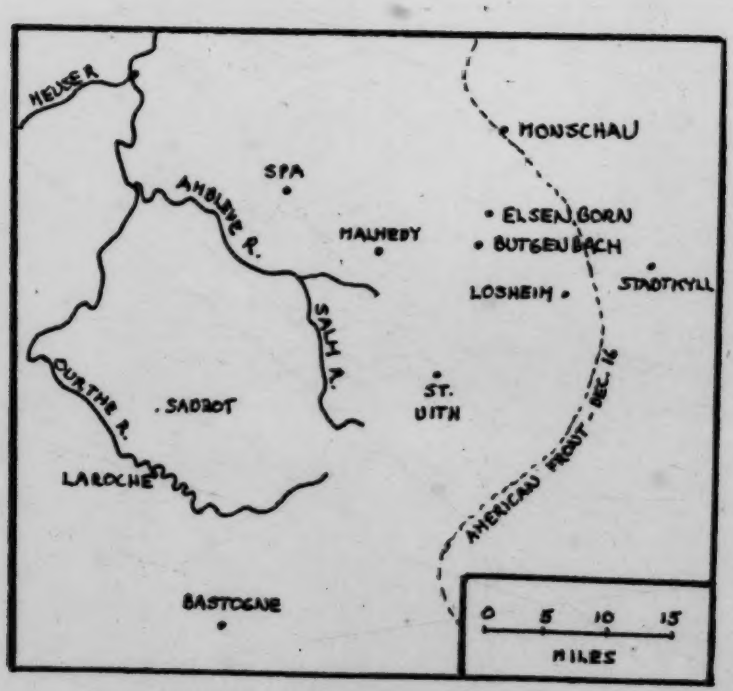
Map 1. Battleground of the 12th SS Panzer Division West of Caen



Map 2. Battleground of the 12th SS Panzer Division South of Caen



Map 3. The Road Network in the Ardennes



Map 4. The Ardennes

Map 5. Hungary and Austria

APPENDIX 3.

TABLE OF WAFFEN-SS OFFICER RANKS

Waffen-SS	Approximate Canadian Equivalent
Reichsführer-SS	Field-Marshal
SS-Oberstgruppenführer	General
SS-Obergruppenführer	Lieutenant-General
SS-Gruppenführer	Major-General
SS-Brigadeführer	Brigadier
SS-Oberführer	Senior Colonel
SS-Standartenführer	Colonel
SS-Obersturmbannführer	Lieutenant-Colonel
SS-Sturmbannführer	Major
SS-Hauptsturmführer	Captain
SS-Obersturmführer	Lieutenant
SS-Untersturmführer	2nd Lieutenant